



BiEPAG



Seizing the
Macedonian
Moment

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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 is the year of opportunity for the Western Balkans. After years of neglect and dropping down the list of priorities, the region has a real opportunity to make great strides in the coming year. This includes the opening of new EU accession talks, renewed prospects of NATO membership and several breakthroughs in regional bilateral relations. There is no guarantee that this will happen, but if the Western Balkans stands in the same place they are now in in a year, it will be a defeat for the region and the EU. If the window of opportunity in 2018 passes, the 2019 will be a lost year with European Parliament elections and formation of new European Commission. Thus, 2019 would be at best a year of waiting.

Why is 2018 offering these new openings to redefine the region? First, the laissez-faire approach of the EU towards the Western Balkans has merely highlighted that such a laid-back approach does not only fail to yield results, but is counterproductive, opening the door to other actors filling the void. Building resilient societies able to resist other external threats and bounce-back from crisis is only possible with EU engagement.

Stabilitocracy has become widely used and understood to describe regimes that offer stability, but lack genuine commitment to democracy and reform.

With the constant flow of crises in the EU apparently ebbing, the region has become more visible and it constitutes a much needed, yet low-hanging fruit for the EU to demonstrate its ability to act.

An important regional change has been the new government of Macedonia with its clear commitment to reforms and transforming the country from a stabilitocracy to a genuine democratic aspirant to the EU and NATO. While Montenegro and Serbia have been termed front-runners, Macedonia is seeking to catch up. Together with Albania, which has also been seeking to close the gap, a healthy competition about joining the EU is slowly beginning to emerge.

Macedonia became a champion of reform in 2017, based on the experience of a decade of democratic decline. If 2017 was the year of crisis and opportunity, 2018 offers either transformation or stagnation.

The change of government was based not only on replacing an increasingly authoritarian and nationalist government, but also on a genuine commitment to a reformist alternative that included civil society engagement. Transforming this legacy into a new regional dynamic requires serious reforms and not giving in to temptation by the new government on the one hand, but also a genuine offer of engagement and membership by the EU and NATO on the other. Beyond the relations between Macedonia and the EU and NATO, there is a need for rebuilding regional trust. Trust remains a fragile commodity in the Balkans. From tit-for-tat in bilateral relations to responses to ICTY verdicts, the atmosphere in the region at the political level is often tense and based on mistrust. For every single confidence building measure governments in the region commit to, populist rhetoric and deliberate crises destroy the regional rapprochement. Such steps yield short-term successes, but both contribute to the regional tensions and the external view that the region is a source of problems.

Therefore, the only path to change this dynamic is to build on domestic transformation and regional cooperation, bolstered by the EU:

1. Domestic Transformation

For Macedonia to become a front-runner in the process of EU integrations, it needs to remain a lighthouse of democratic reforms in the region. While 2017 highlighted the risks of democratic backsliding and the opportunities of recommitting to democracy, 2018 needs to highlight the structural changes. The past two decades have been marked by a back and forth between weak democracies and semi-authoritarian regimes in the region. They have been marked by high levels of clientelism, informal networks and strong party control. These patterns have transformed legal reforms often into facades behind which business as usual continued. Ensuring a more enduring transformation requires not a change of government, but a change of practice, retreating from informal and fast “fixes”, ensuring independent and accountable institutions and promoting a meritocratic system. The EU needs to focus less on supporting just people, “reformers”, but on new approaches that result of long-term transformation of institutions.

While it is important to prosecute those responsible for the wrongdoings of the previous Government, not excluding the possibility of lustration, the real danger is to loose the constructive opposition in the country. It is important to give a chance to the oppositional VMRO DPMNE to regain the ground under their feet, and grant their new leadership the opportunity to participate in public life, give that they did not participate in crimes against democracy in previous years.

Such a commitment will be necessary not only to secure a sustained transformation: it is also is the only way to EU membership. While stabilocratic approaches might be a short-term fix to get a country closer to the EU, there are long-term costs to this as well as the experience of increasing autocratic rule among some EU members will make the Union more vigilant about ensuring future members do not follow the same path. Sustainable and irreversible EU related reforms need to be implemented.

2. Regional Cooperation

Regional cooperation has greatly increased since the launch of the Berlin Process. However, now there is need to take cooperation to the next level. This includes finding new paths to build regional confidence beyond the now all too common meetings of prime ministers and other ministers from the region. Without broader social engagement in regional cooperation it will remain an empty shell. This includes regional discussions about the past, textbook commissions, exchanges and a plethora of forms of cooperation that run in parallel with more concerted efforts to resolve open bilateral disputes. Now that the ICTY is winding down, the question remains who will contribute to resolving the outstanding issues relating to the wars connected with the breakup of Yugoslavia. It is therefore important to support regional initiatives, such as the REKOM, that aim to confront nationalist narratives and establish the responsibility for the wrong policies of the past. Furthermore, additional processes need to be set up to build trust in the region, such as new forms of dialogue about the past and confronting controversies.

In the meantime, all parties should engage into an exercise of trust building through symbolically relevant gestures, such as renaming the Skopje 'Alexander the Great' Airport. Finally, the hyper-production of regional cooperation mechanisms can be reduced to more manageable numbers both in terms of institutions, competing donors, and in regard to formats.

3. EU support

The EU cannot solve all problems, but it can enable a new transformative dynamic in the region. This includes being more supportive of those governments who seek to make progress, but also more inquisitive, explicit about shortcomings, including public naming and shaming and, as done by Commissioner Johannes Hahn during his December 2017 visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Enabling a regional competition that is beginning to emerge would be an important step, including the goal of opening accession talks with both Macedonia and Albania in 2018, and offering a clear perspective for joint accession to the EU, if the four countries and some potential catch-up candidates join their ranks. At best, all the WB countries should be asked to draw up an Action Plan for Chapters 23 and 24, which, after a screening exercise, should lead to their opening as soon as possible.

This should be followed by the conditional mobilization of financial resources for priority projects with a huge economic multiplier effect, such as infrastructure, education, skills, innovation and applied research. Drawing from this financial line, however, would be strictly conditioned by countries' successful performances in meeting the accession criteria set in negotiating Chapters 23 and 24.

It is equally significant that the EU continues to use local expertise, whereas the collaboration with credible civil society organizations should be further institutionalized via regular channels of communication, through commissioning regular "shadow" reports on the state of democracy and similar efforts.

If enlargement was a strange dance, between those pretending to want to join the EU and the EU pretending to want the countries, as BiEPAG has argued, 2018 offers a chance to move to a more sincere engagement. This would both highlight the weakness in the region, but also the strengths more sincerely and includes building regional connections beyond roads and other infrastructure. If this is accomplished, 2018 can be a game changer for the region, if not, it will be just another missed opportunity.

About BiEPAG

The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) is a co-operation initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and Centre for the Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz (CSEES) with the aim to promote the European integration of the Western Balkans and the consolidation of democratic, open countries in the region. BiEPAG is composed by prominent policy researchers from the Western Balkans and wider Europe that have established themselves for their knowledge and understanding of the Western Balkans and the processes that shape the region. Current members of the BiEPAG are: Dimitar Bechev, Florian Bieber, Blerjana Bino, Srdjan Cvijić, Milica Delević, Marika Djolai, Vedran Džihić, Tobias Flessenkemper, Dejan Jović, Marko Kmezić, Jovana Marović, Milan Nič, Corina Stratulat, Dane Taleski, Nikolaos Tzifakis, Alida Vračić, and Natasha Wunsch.

About the European Fund for the Balkans

The European Fund for the Balkans is designed to create and support initiatives aimed at strengthening democracy and fostering European integration by enabling inclusive policy making, supporting capacity development and creating a platform for exchange and co-operation in the Western Balkans. The Fund was launched in 2007 by four European private foundations (King Baudouin Foundation, Erste Foundation, Robert Bosch Stiftung and the Compagnia di san Paolo), within the framework of the Network of European Foundations.

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About the Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz

About the Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz The Centre for Southeast European Studies was set up in November 2008 following the establishment of Southeast Europe as a strategic priority at the University of Graz in 2000. The Centre is an interdisciplinary and cross-faculty institution for research and education, established with the goal to provide space for the rich teaching and research activities at the university on and with Southeast Europe and to promote interdisciplinary collaboration. Since its establishment, the centre also aimed to provide information and documentation and to be a point of contact for media and the public interested in Southeast Europe, in terms of political, legal, economic and cultural developments. An interdisciplinary team of lawyers, historians, and political scientists working at the Centre has contributed to research on Southeast Europe, through numerous articles, monographs and other publications. In addition, the centre regularly organizes international conferences and workshops to promote cutting edge research on Southeast Europe.

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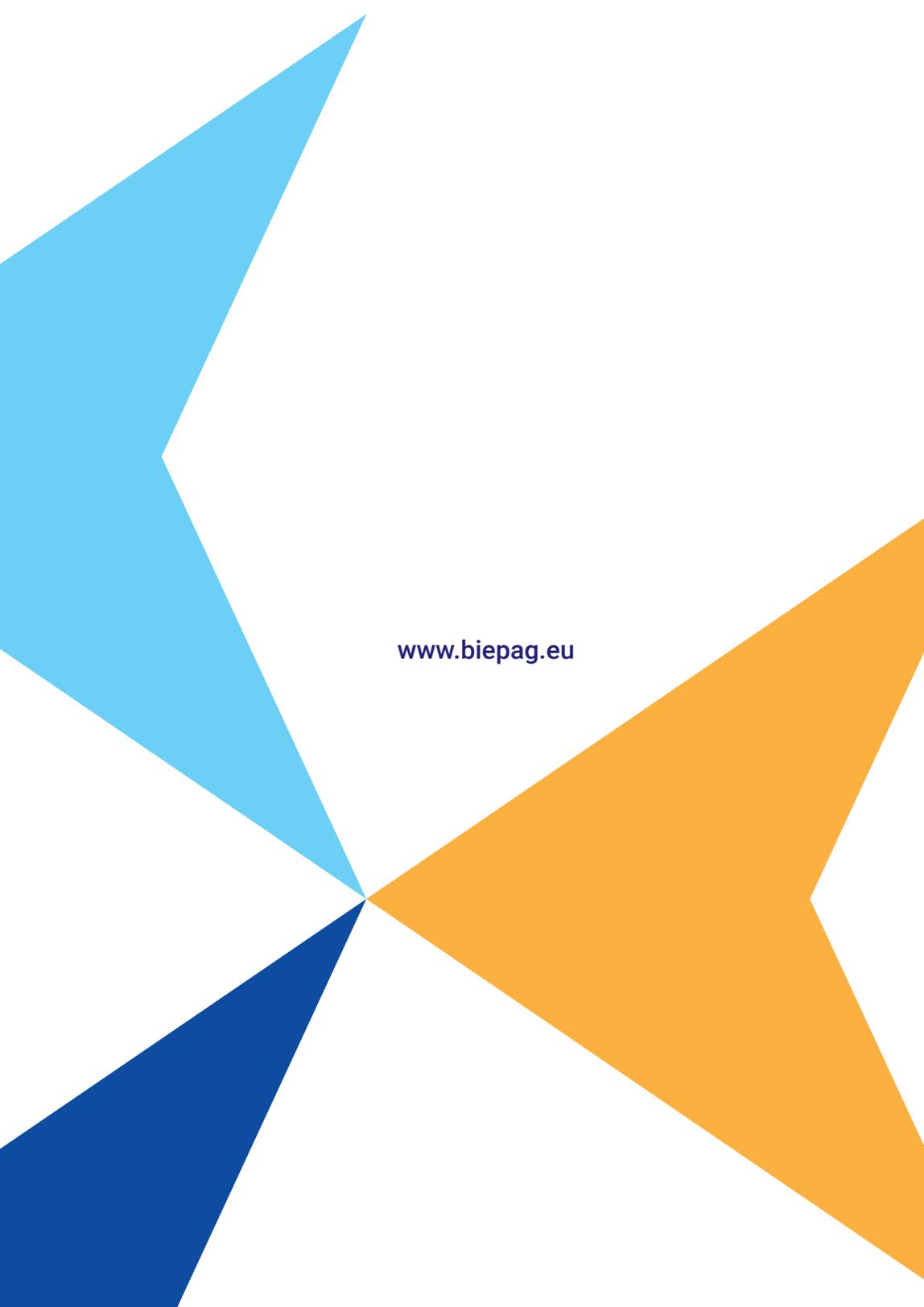
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