Socio-Political Conditions and Developments

The region of South-Eastern Europe or the Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries is comprised of sixteen relatively small countries (excluding Ukraine) all of which – except for Greece – were until the early 1990s ruled by communist regimes and had effectively no political, economic or cultural relations with New Zealand during their communist past. Following the collapse of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and the opening of the European Union's Eastern Enlargement process, three post-communist states from the Balkans – Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia – joined the EU by 2013. All their remaining Balkan neighbours, labelled (together with Croatia) by the EU 'the Western Balkans', have also expressed a strong desire to follow the pathway of these three. Currently, North Macedonia (which was until recently known as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), Montenegro, Serbia and Albania hold the status of official EU candidates, while the remaining two – Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo – have a longer way to go and are still considered as only potential candidates for EU membership. Unlike their post-communist counterparts from Central Europe, the Baltics and the Western Balkans, the six countries from the Eastern Partnership are not offered a membership perspective to the European Union. The Eastern Partnership, which is an offshoot, and the Eastern dimension, of the European Neighbourhood Policy is the EU's policy initiative to forge closer ties with the six countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus (namely: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine). The partnership seeks to promote regional stability through trade agreements and democratic institution-building. The Programme offers partner countries tariff-free access to the EU's single market in exchange for their adoption of trade-related and political EU legislation.

Despite the much greater political and economic openness of all these countries during their post-communist history, New Zealand's political, economic, cultural, trade and tourist relations with all the post-communist Balkan states and the Eastern Partnership countries have remained marginal at best. However, some positive recent trends, especially in relations with the new EU member states from the region of post-communist Europe, indicate that there is potential for significant improvement of all types of relations between New Zealand and both the Balkan states and the Eastern Partnership countries. In addition to academic relevance, the main objective of these policy briefs is to raise awareness among the NZ intellectual and wider public, particularly the political and business elites, of the main social-political and economic trends in these two groups of states as a pre-condition for identifying potential opportunities for the improvement of cooperation. The two policy briefs that this Jean Monnet Chair will issue annually for the period September 2017 – September 2020 will cover the following aspects of the contemporary developments of the Balkan States and the Eastern Partnership countries:

- General macroeconomic and social trends in the region and their impact on NZ trade, tourism and its socio-cultural and people-to-people links with the Balkan and the Eastern Partnership countries;

- Socio-political conditions and developments in the respective countries with regard to intra-regional cooperation and progress in democratisation and the European integration process. Particular attention will be paid to providing an overview of the current state of play as regards the Western Balkan states' attempts to meet the official political and socio-economic conditions for EU accession, EU relations with the Eastern Partnership countries, and the latter's progress in democratisation and in complying with the socio-political and economic requirements of the Eastern Partnership programme.

1. General socio-political conditions and developments

Socio-political developments in the Western Balkan states and the Eastern Partnership countries are of evident political significance for the European continent and beyond. A closer look at this policy document reveals that almost in all countries of our focus, political governance standards, democracy scores and regime ratings continue to decline. The biggest political events in 2019 were protests which challenged governments, politicians, the police and social attitudes all over the region. Protests in Serbia, Albania, Georgia and Montenegro took people to the streets in record numbers. Moreover, political developments in the Western Balkans affected the functioning of national parliaments. For instance, the Assembly of Albania was affected by a high degree of polarisation and a prolonged boycott by the opposition; similarly, the assembly of Kosovo continued to operate in a highly polarised political context. Furthermore, there was limited progress in Montenegro's political dialogue between government and opposition.

According to the Freedom House's *Freedom In The World* assessment, democracy and individual freedoms have continued to backslide in both the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries as have in the earlier democratised post-communist states of East Central Europe and the Baltics (Table 1). While Belarus and Azerbaijan remain highly authoritarian, all other countries in the two regions which are the focus of this policy brief (with the exception of three EU member states) are still half-way to their full

democratisation. Among them, Armenia is the only country in all post-communist Europe which was able to significantly improve its 'freedom score' in last year (from 44 to 51) and Serbia is the country which worsened its freedom score more than any other European post-communist state (from 74 to 67) over the last year. The main reason for the latter unfavourable trend can be found in 'deterioration in the conduct of elections, continued attempts by the government and allied media outlets to undermine independent journalists… and President Aleksandar Vučić's de facto accumulation of executive powers that conflict with his constitutional role'.[1]

In addition to Armenia, Ukraine made substantial steps towards democracy in 2019 which are expected to be reflected in the improvement of this country's freedom score in 2020. In both countries elections were held that were judged to be free and fair. In Armenia, the OSCE judged that the snap election in December 2018 "respected fundamental freedoms and enjoyed broad public trust". This came after Nikol Pashinian, the opposition leader, took office as prime minister and began an anti-corruption campaign. In Ukraine, the presidential and parliamentary elections were held in April and July 2019 and both were convincingly won by a non-professional politician, ex-comedian Volodymyr Zelensky and his newly founded party.

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[1] 'Democracy in Retreat', *Freedom in the World* 2019 (Serbia). Available at:

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Table 1. Indicators of freedom and democratisation in post-communist Europe

East-Central Europe and the Baltic states	2016		2017		2018	
	FW*	TICPI**	FW*	TICPI**	FW*	TICPI**
Czechia	95	55	93	59	91	57
Hungary	79	48	72	46	70	45
Poland	93	62	85	60	84	60
Slovenia	92	61	93	60	94	61
Slovakia	89	51	89	50	88	50
Estonia	94	70	94	73	94	71
Latvia	86	57	87	58	87	58
Lithuania	91	59	91	59	91	59
South-Eastern Europe						
Albania	67	39	68	38	68	36
Bosnia and Herz	57	39	55	38	55	38
Bulgaria	80	41	80	43	80	42
Croatia	87	49	87	49	86	48
Kosovo	52	36	52	39	52	37
Montenegro	70	45	69	46	67	45
North Macedonia	57	37	57	35	58	37
6Romania	83	41	84	48	84	47
Serbia	78	42	76	41	74	39
Eastern Partnership						
Armenia	46	33	45	35	44	35
Azerbaijan	16	30	14	31	12	25
Belarus	17	40	20	44	21	44
Georgia	64	57	64	56	64	58
Moldova	60	30	62	31	61	33
Ukraine	61	29	61	30	62	32

* Freedom in the World (FW) is an annual global report on political rights and civil liberties, composed of numerical ratings and descriptive texts for each country and a select group of territories. The report's methodology is derived in large measure from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948. Freedom in the World operates from the assumption that freedom for all people is best achieved in liberal democratic societies. The aggregate Freedom Scores are based on a scale of 0 to 100, with 100 representing the highest level of freedom and 0 the lowest. The 2019 edition covers developments in the respective countries from January 1, 2018, through December 31, 2018.

** Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (TICPI) is published annually in December and gives information about the corruption level in each country of the world for that calendar year. Science 2012 the TICPI has ranged from 100 (very clean) to 0 (highly corrupt).Although it is already included in the NIT's democracy scores, the level of corruption in the respective countries as measured by the TICPI is also given here as a separate indicator – for simplicity's sake, it has been covered to a 100 to 0 scale for all years shown in the table – in order to address the importance of this factor of democratisation, which is often used as an expression of not only the existing level of corruption in the public sector but also as a reflection of the general stability of democratic institutions and the rule of law in the respective countries.

2. Country developments

It has been more than a year since the general elections in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** (BiH) took place on the 7th of October 2018. Nevertheless, the current BiH Council of Ministers at national level was not established until August 2019.[i] One of the main obstacles to the formation of the new Council of Ministers has been BiH's accession process to NATO. In addition, governments have not been formed in the Federation of BiH (FBiH), a federal body that is predominantly Bosnian and Croatian, and in two of the ten cantons of the Federation. This impasse represents continuing divisions and conflicts among Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs. Furthermore, the tensions continue to escalate in Bosnia's Serb-dominated Republika Srpska. Concerns have been raised about the plan of the government of Republika Srpska to purchase substantial amounts of weapons in an attempt to militarise the police forces. However, the officials of the RS announced that they need forces to deal with security challenges and the ongoing migrant crisis[ii].

The fight against corruption is still stalled in **Kosovo**. In August 2018, state prosecutor Elez Blakaj resigned his post after receiving numerous threats while pursuing a case related to fraud in the pension system for veterans. Moreover, the current situation in Kosovo is unstable and the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue effectively stalled after August 2018. Although it seemed that by late August 2018 the two parties had come very close to a 'compromise solution' which was supported by EU High Representative for Foreign Policy Federica Mogherini, Commissioner for Enlargement Hahn and the leaders of some EU member states (foremost Austria, Italy and Greece), the strong opposition of some domestic political factors in both Serbia and Kosovo, but even more so of the leaders of other EU member states, did not allow any possible finalisation of the deal. Especially strong opposition has come from the powerful UK and German political leadership who claimed that any deal which (as this one did)

would include a 'redraw of borders' between the involved parties could be used as a precedent in other similar disputes, and is as such unacceptable.[iii] After that, tensions between Belgrade and Pristina continued to grow. The Kosovo government imposed a 10% tax on imports of goods from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina on 6 November 2018, citing Belgrade's ongoing attempts to undermine Kosovo's international standing as the main reason for the decision.

After the outgoing Kosovo Prime Minister Haradinaj (who is also a staunch opponent of any deal with Serbia which would include the border changes) further increased taxes on all imports of goods from Serbia to 100% in November 2018[iv] and Serbia's President Vučić has repeatedly stated that Serbia will never recognise Kosovo if it does not get 'something in return',[v] the two parties seem to be further from finding a common stance than they have ever been since the launch of the Brussels talks in 2011.

While many political parties are vying for power in **Montenegro**, the opposition is divided, and the governing Democratic Party of Montenegrin Socialists has been in power since 1991. Corruption remains a major problem. The political scene remains fragmented, divided and without a genuine political discourse. Some progress has been made in restoring Parliament's political discourse in June 2018 with the temporary and partial return to Parliament of the majority of opposition parties and the creation of a provisional parliamentary committee[vi].

However, after the arrest of one parliamentary opposition leader at the end of 2018 and the allegations of corruption and illicit political party fundraising (the "envelope affair") in early 2019, the opposition largely returned to boycotting the Parliament[vii]. These allegations also triggered citizen mobilisation through regular street protests, after the release of videos and documents that seemed to implicate top officials in collecting illegal

funds.[viii]. The protesters demanded free and transparent elections and the resignation of President Djukanovic and the chief prosecutor for organised crime. In August 2019 the opposition Democratic Montenegro and United Reform Action parties decided to cooperate in the future work of the board for electoral system reform, in order to create conditions for holding fair and free elections in 2020. However, the board eventually failed at the end of December 2019, after the Democrats left the board sessions in protest to the passing of the controversial religious law (the law will force religious communities to register everything they own as well as evidence of ownership in order to retain their property).[ix]

Fundamental freedoms and the democratic institutions of **Serbia** continued to deteriorate in 2019. The areas particularly affected during the year were media independence, civil society, national democratic governance, and the conditions under which local elections were held. Serbia also experienced in its internal affairs the manifestation of the mass protests across the Balkans. The anti-government protests, known as "One of five million", emerged in the wake of the assault on opposition politician Borko Stefanović in November 2018. However, the opposition has not yet consolidated around a single leader or decided on a strategy for fast-approaching parliamentary elections in mid-2020[x] The number protesting has been declining but the protests continue. From tens of thousands at their height in February 2019, the weekly protests in Belgrade have gathered just a few hundred at year's end.

In June 2018, Skopje and Athens signed a comprehensive pact, the Prespa Agreement, to rename the country the Republic of **North Macedonia**, in exchange for Greek support for its European Union (EU) and NATO membership[xi]. A referendum on the name change in September 2018 received support from more than 90 percent of voters, but turnout was only 37 percent, significantly below the 50 percent threshold needed to make the ballot valid.[xii] As the referendum was non-binding and included constitutional changes, it also had to be ratified by two-thirds of the Assembly of the Republic. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev vowed to push forward with the changes in the Assembly, which was achieved on 19 October 2018 when 80 of the 120 MPs voted in favour of the renaming proposal, just reaching the two-thirds majority required and potentially paving the way for EU and NATO membership.[xiii]

Moreover, North Macedonia continues to fight corruption. As a result, former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski was sentenced to two years in prison in May 2019 following a conviction of corruption which arose from the purchase of a $700,000 Mercedes in 2012. Gruevski, with the help of Hungarian diplomats, fled to Hungary in November and claimed political asylum there, which was reportedly granted by the Hungarian government[xiv].

Corruption and organised crime in **Albania** continue to be a serious problem (see Table 1 and previous EUCN policy briefs). The country remains a hybrid regime and no improvement in terms of democracy has been recorded during 2018 and the first half of 2019 (see Table 1). In addition, the nature of Albania's political landscape remained explosive during this period. Several anti-government demonstrations have exposed public frustration with the government. These included huge demonstrations by students against increased tuition fees, and separate protests against a proposed Tirana development plan and a new tax system which was opposed by many small business owners[xv].

In response to student protests, Prime Minister Edi Rama reorganised half of his cabinet at the end of December 2018 and promised to talk to students and meet their demands. Moreover, the German newspaper "Bild" has deepened the political crisis in Albania after publishing several taped conversations, which are part of so-called file 339, which the Prosecutor's Office is investigating. Edi Rama and many of his ministers seem in these conversations to engage in stealing votes and also planning to

do the same thing in the second election, which should have been held on the 30th of June 2019[xvi]. Following months of political crisis, the opposition parties refused to participate in the election; therefore, the President had to postpone the election date to October 13th.[xvii]

Looking at the overall picture of the political processes, none of the Eastern Partnership countries can claim to have sustainable democratic institutions.[xviii] Despite the fact that the political climate in **Moldova** is competitive and the freedom of assembly, expression and religion is largely protected systematic government corruption and deficiencies in the rule of law continue to obstruct democratic governance. On 24 February 2019, parliamentary elections were held in Moldova to elect the 101 Moldovan parliamentarians. The elections were held under a parallel voting system, replacing the closed-list proportional system used in Moldova in all previous parliamentary elections since independence. The voting period began in November 2018 and lasted until the election day. An OSCE report released one day after the elections, on February 25, emphasised that elections, in which pro-Russian Socialists did best, were generally held in a proper framework, but noted reports of pressure on public employees, strong signs of buying votes and abuse of state resources[xix]. Moldova's Constitutional Court confirmed the results on 9 March 2019. However, the election results still triggered a constitutional crisis in June, after the Constitutional Court ruled (on 7 June), that the deadline for the Parliament to appoint the new Government had expired. Therefore, political bloc ACUM and the PSRM[xx] signed a temporary agreement for the formation of a majority government, Zinaida Greceanii being voted the president of the Parliament and Maia Sandu being appointed the head of the Government[xxi].

The armed conflict between the **Ukrainian** government and militia groups supported by Russia in eastern Ukraine is into its sixth year. Despite the stalled conflict situation, Ukraine was able to elect a new president and parliament. The Ukrainian presidential election of 2019 took place in a two-round system on March 31 and April 21. A total of 39 candidates were on the ballot for the election. Since no candidate obtained an absolute majority in the first round, a run-off was held on 21 April 2019 between the top two candidates: a comedian Volodymyr Zelensky, who played the role of the president of Ukraine in a popular television comedy, and the incumbent president, Petro Poroshenko. According to the Central Election Commission, Zelensky, with 73.22% of the votes, won the second round. Three months later, on 21 July, the country's snap parliamentary election was convincingly won by Zelensky's newly founded party with 43.16% of the votes and nearly 60% of the parliamentary seats. With such an exceptionally strong mandate, Zelensky promised to "break the system"[xxii], starting with judicial reform and the fight against corruption.[xxiii]

Despite the fact that **Georgia** holds regular and competitive elections, progress in democracy and rule of law has stagnated in recent years. Oligarchic groups have undue control over economic and political choices, and political interests are still undermining the rule of law. (See JM Chair MP Brief No 2/2017-18). Georgia has a dual executive with a prime minister serving as head of government and the president as head of state. The president had been directly elected for up to two terms of five years, but the president elected in 2018 will serve a six-year term under constitutional changes approved in 2017[xxiv]. Salome Zourabishvili, an independent former foreign minister backed by Georgian Dream (which is the governing party of Georgia established on 19 April 2012 by the billionaire businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili), received 39 percent of the vote in the first round of the 2018 presidential election in October, followed by Grigol Vashadze, a former foreign minister standing for the UNM, with 38 percent. Observers stated that the balloting took place in a largely peaceful environment, but there were accusations of the ruling party buying votes[xxv].

Furthermore, a series of major protests took place in Tbilisi throughout 2019, particularly in June. The crowd was provoked by the visit of a Russian legislator, Sergei Gavrilov, who addressed Georgian parliamentarians in the Russian language from the speaker's seat, which severely angered those who wish to keep Russia out of Georgian politics[xxvi]. In response, Vladimir Putin instructed Russian travel agencies to suspend tours to Georgia and ordered the government to bring back any Russian tourists vacationing there.[xxvii] Around one million Russian tourists spend their holidays in Georgia every year.

Belarus remains an authoritarian state in which elections are orchestrated and freedoms are severely restricted. Alyaksandr Lukashenko was first elected in 1994, in the country's only democratic election. He has since extended his rule in a series of unfair contests. The country held parliamentary elections on 17 November 2019. Lukashenko maintained his hold on power as the official results of the November's elections showed that not a single opposition candidate had won a seat[xxviii]. All 110 Members of Parliament elected represent parties loyal to the president. According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) "fundamental freedoms were disregarded and the integrity of the election process was not adequately safeguarded."[xxix]

Meanwhile, the poor human rights record in **Azerbaijan** did not improve in 2018 and the first half of 2019. President Ilham Aliyev was elected for a fourth term in April in elections which were considered to lack competition (see previous brief). At least 43 human rights defenders, reporters, politicians and religious activists were illegally detained, while hundreds more were detained or prosecuted, threatened or banned from travelling.[xxx]

However, Azerbaijani authorities released some political activists. In August 2018, authorities released prominent political activist Ilgar Mammadov who had served more than five years in prison on charges considered to be unconstitutional by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).[xxxi] Despite the violation of human rights, rule of law and fundamental freedoms, European and international financial institutions keep funding Azrbaijanian hydrocarbon projects. For instance, in March 2018, the European Investment Bank (EIB) approved a €932 million loan for the construction of the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP). According to Human Right Watch, the EIB did not condition the loan on the improvement of human rights, even though its obligations under the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights include that it should not finance projects which would encourage or support human rights violations[xxxii].

Armenia Following weeks of popular protests in April and May 2018 against the outgoing president, Serzh Sargsyan, the former opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan became prime minister of Armenia (see previous policy brief). Meanwhile, the new government, headed by Pashinyan pushed for a series of high-profile trials against former senior officials, most notably ex-president Robert Kocharyan, billing them as anti-corruption measures[xxxiii]. Kocharyan was accused of illegally ordering Armenian Army soldiers to use force against opposition supporters who were protesting against alleged fraud in the disputed presidential election of February 2008. Kocharyan, 64, was freed on August 13 by an appeals court that ruled the constitution gave him immunity from prosecution in connection with the 2008 violence[xxxiv].

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