

Editorial

The second issue of the *SEER Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe* for 2018 addresses European integration challenges in south-east Europe. European integration has been one of the key topics that we have regularly addressed over the years, including also a retrospective special issue in 2015. In May 2018, we held a *SEER* 20 years Anniversary Symposium in Sofia devoted also to the issue of the EU accession process of the region. In this issue we focus on the challenges of this integration process from different angles. First a theoretical essay by Christophe Solioz sets the tone, followed by an article covering wage developments and the lack of wage convergence in the region and another one addressing the challenge of migration for Western Balkans countries. Two more articles on relevant social issues and two book reviews make the issue complete.

The second part of the article by *Christophe Solioz* continues to discuss the *European integration perspective of the Western Balkans* in a historical perspective. The first part of the article (*SEER* 2018-1) focused on the first twenty years of transition since the fall of the Berlin Wall, questioning in particular the ‘turning point’ rhetoric often applied to the fate of countries of the region and the European Union, and concluded that Europe is facing a ‘polycrisis’. Now, the author focuses on the challenges presented by (the lack of) convergence and by the unfinished economic and monetary union, as root causes of an emerging trend towards a de-legitimising of the EU, and the rise of populism. Then he proposes a new regionalism approach as a possible future narrative for the Europeanisation process.

The author finds that in wake of the 2004 Constitution debate, the 2007-08 crisis and the current de-convergence trend with signs of de-consolidation and de-democratisation, the EU membership perspective of the western Balkans is more distant. As he puts it “the multi-faceted crisis has radicalised criticism of the Union” while citizens are turning away from the European project. After presenting a ‘reality check’ in terms of convergence outcomes and public opinion figures he identifies an alarming trend towards democratic backsliding in the ‘western Balkans’, not to speak about the pervasive effect of the establishment of illiberal regimes in Hungary and Poland. He concludes at this point that Europe today is home to intolerance, chauvinism and xenophobia.

Despite the rhetoric and the many conferences with their (self-) reassuring statements and promises, the accession prospects for south-east European countries seem unambiguously bleak. The enthusiasm and political will have evaporated and, most crucially, EU policy and strategies have failed to acknowledge the emerging new world order. The author also notes that in South East Europe the concept of ‘integration’ is almost exclusively related to the European Union accession process instead of a deeper the sense of belonging to Europe independently of being an EU member state.

He then presents a ‘New Regionalism Approach’, based on the framework of ‘comparative regionalism’, that highlights a multi-dimensional and pluralist type of regionalism, as well as new institutional designs and an active role for non-state actors. Reminding us that the geopolitical upheaval in 1989 intensified and deepened

the linkage between integration and regional co-operation, he refers to the creation of Euroregions in the early 1990s that also linked east and west territories, contributing notably to speeding up the path of central and eastern European countries towards accession. After the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon, territorial cohesion became a strategic goal of EU regional policy and regional co-operation became an integral part of EU integration policy.

The article by *Bruno S. Sergi, Sanja Paunović and Rajko Kosanović* provides an analysis of the main trends in wages, employment and poverty in south-eastern Europe. As an update and extension of their earlier article in SEER, the authors review here the most recent performance of south-east European, and eastern European, economies on the issue of wages.

Daniilo Maria Merlo and Gabriele Lombardo assess the impact of migration along the 'Balkan route' for Serbia and Croatia. The authors describe the flow of migrants towards the EU and seeks to provide a preliminary assessment of the impact of such flows on the economies of Croatia and Serbia, two countries on the route (not necessarily destination countries), whose economies are themselves still fragile and in transition owing to their own recent histories.

Igor Guardiancich addresses controversial reform attempts universal non-means-tested basic old age pension in Kosovo. The unique model in the region provides an income floor for all resident citizens aged 65 and over who do not qualify for other budget-financed schemes. It is regarded as administratively simple and cost-efficient. As a universal scheme, it is ill-equipped to provide for the clientelist needs of Kosovo's politicians. The Labour Ministry planned in 2016 to cut the zero pillar to finance the special schemes for war veterans. This article argues that dismantling the basic pension is potentially harmful to the poorest strata of the elderly population and is, at the same time, also out of touch with Kosovo's labour market realities.

Finally, the article by *Biljana Čavkoska* discusses the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030 with focus on the social inclusion of disabled people in the context of FYR Macedonia. The article identifies several measures focused on legal and practical action that will be necessary to achieve the social inclusion of disabled people, particularly in the area of social policy and employment.

Béla Galgóczi
Calvin Allen

December 2018