

Editorial

This first issue of the *SEER Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe* for 2022 focuses on the effects of multiple crises on south-east Europe, under the title ‘South-east Europe in a turbulent world’. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine poses a fundamental threat to the rules-based international order and to the stability of Europe. The Balkans is massively affected due to the ambivalent relations with Russia held by large parts of it, not to speak about its dependence on Russian fossil fuels. The current geopolitical shifts are also putting the eastern enlargement of the EU into a different perspective. This issue therefore covers various topics including EU enlargement, the status of Bosnia and Herzegovina and migration, all three having been discussed in the *SEER Journal* in the last couple of years in great detail.

In the first block of articles, *Lubomira Popova* examines the transforming role of the European Commission in the EU integration process. She points out that, in the current geopolitical atmosphere of instability and insecurity on the eastern borders of the EU, enlargement has resurfaced as a topic of high priority. She questions the dominant narrative that EU enlargement policy is largely considered as the most successful EU policy. She identifies the key problem of the EU’s approach in the pivotal role of the European Commission as a political actor conducting a discretionary policy, hidden behind the claim of a completely strict, objective assessment based on the merits of the candidate countries. Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative empirical analysis, and using the symptomatic example of Bulgaria, this article aims to understand how the Commission has perceived the specificities of the task of expanding to the post-communist countries of central and eastern Europe and how, based on this perception, it has built its interaction with them. The author concludes that the failures of the policy need to be remedied if future enlargements to the western Balkans are to be successful.

Riada Asimovic Akyol tests the west’s long-distorted view of the Balkans and their people that, in her judgement, has led to a ‘catastrophic’ outcome. The author recalls some of the facts related to the Bosnian genocide and the horrific, inhumane regard which the perpetrators had for the bodies of those they had killed, reminding us that remembrance is not only crucial in itself but because genocide can happen anywhere. She then turns to the ‘catastrophic’ failures of western policy during the 1990s rooted substantially in Islamophobia and a desire to emphasise Christianised Europe, contrasting this with the intellectual galvanisation and growth of self-consciousness among Bosniaks with a view to re-building a multiethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The article by *Jens Becker and Ina Kulić* ‘Sliding into the abyss? Bosnia-Herzegovina 30 years after the start of the war’ reviews the current political, social and economic situation of the country just after the thirtieth anniversary of the start of the war (April 1992). Drawing on a variety of judiciously-chosen contemporary sources in the German language, and taking account of the parallels which can be drawn with an analysis of the geopolitical significance of the war in Ukraine, the authors consider the impact of the nationalisms which have taken centre stage not only in how Bosnia-Herzegovina is currently viewed in international perspective but which, more

importantly, have sparked sabre-rattling threats of secession. According to the authors, such threats represent a diversionary tactic by political leaders in the light of various enduring domestic crises, including unemployment, corruption and the emigration of skilled young people. The authors are not without hope and see the ‘togetherness’ which represents the Bosnian specific as a positive sign that needs to be captured and reinforced.

Peter Scherrer explores a recent successful threat of industrial action at the ArcelorMittal steel plant at Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Building in interviews with trade union leaders, the author locates the campaign against the background of the economic, political and social situation in the country as well as the difficulties these impose on effective trade union organisation. In the face of the general weakness of trade unions, examples of successful industrial action can not only be seen as practical assistance in raising the wages of the workers involved, they also provide powerful examples of the continuing logic of collective action and, thus, a strong motivation to seek out trade union membership.

The article by *Georg Blokus, Aleksandra Lakić, Niccolò Milanese, Mladen Nikolova, Tanja Pavlov and Aleksandra Savanović* “Workers without borders?” is an edited version of a study published by FES South-East Europe. It demonstrates that the newest, poorest members of the EU and their neighbouring accession countries in the western Balkans are not only experiencing demographic decline, youth exodus and a ‘brain drain’; they are also effectively subsidising the economic growth and lifestyle of richer European countries through their investment in the training of workers who leave their countries of origin, and via the subsequent loss of social security contributions. Based on interviews with mobile workers themselves and a wider literature review, the authors argue that the EU, governments and trade unions need to enforce existing legislation better and prevent exploitation; empower workers to understand, access and advance their rights; and ultimately rethink the economic relationship between the EU and the region of south-east Europe.

Anisa Balla and Blerta Avdia analyse internal migration and population distribution in Albania in the case of the Durana region (which encompasses Durrës and Tiranë). They start with the assumption that the main reasons both for emigration and internal migration are related to better opportunities for work, education and health-care. They show how internal migration from urban zones to the centre of the country has significantly affected its development, transforming the area into an economic powerhouse. Nevertheless, Durana faces significant social challenges such as poverty (mainly of young families); unemployment of young people; inequality; and difficulty in accessing public goods and services for a part of the population. The study analyses the socio-economic effects of internal migration into Durana and presents the likely challenges of urbanisation for the area in the next decade, influenced by projections for its population and economy.

In the open section of this issue, *Ermira Kalaj, Flora Merko and Ela Golemi* reflect on the link between digitalisation and firm performance during the pandemic in the case of Albania. The article focuses on an analysis of the digitalisation of enterprises in Albania and its impact on their performance, drawing on an econometric analysis of World Bank data examining firms’ experiences and their perceptions of

their operating environment. The authors conclude that, while the impact of digitalisation on performance is positive and statistically significant, achieved chiefly via increased business activity online, there is a need to understand better what this means in practice. Further research is needed to understand how firms will approach digitalisation in the future after the economic shocks of Covid-19.

Qerim Qerimi examines social welfare considerations in a rights-based approach to countering climate change and draws lessons for south-east Europe. Social welfare is gaining prominence in the pursuit of global aspirations to fight climate change, one of the preeminent collective concerns of our time. The author reviews recent landmark judicial decisions in countries including Germany, France and the Netherlands that testify to the prevailing concerns as well as to the inadequacy of the existing measures adopted by states to attain realistic climate goals. The underlying aim of this article is to explore and discern the role and importance of social welfare considerations in the emerging institutional discourse about countering climate change and meeting shared global climate ambitions. In this connection, it seeks to portray wider decision-making trends in western European countries which should, in turn, be interpreted as providing a guiding vision as well as indicators for measuring advances in climate change policies within the region of south-east Europe, which has yet to feature in such court actions.

We mark in this issue the passing in 2021 of Darko Marinković, founding member of the Editorial Board of the *SEER Journal*, with a formal tribute put together both by his colleagues on the board and, in particular with the assistance of Vladimir Marinković, Darko's son. Thank you, Vladimir. The obituary follows on the first pages of the journal following this Editorial. Darko was our colleague and our friend; and we shall miss him greatly.

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Calvin Allen
Béla Galgóczi

