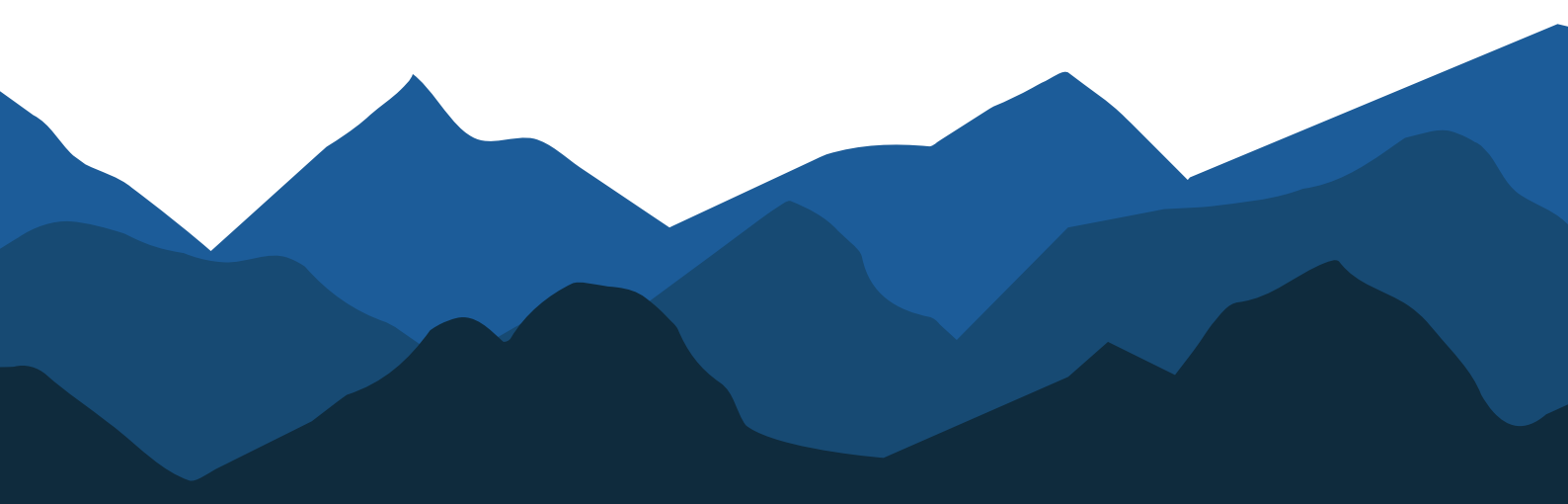


COVID-19 can keep you from going outside, but it cannot keep you from building a better future

weBuildBackSmart is the new European bottom up initiative to develop Strategy for Southeastern Europe after COVID-19: The focus is on making every voice count. Making Europe a better place by believing in the vision of the THINKERS.

In the past three months, the COVID-19 has been an integral part of every single European media article. However, Southeastern Europe (SEE) has too often been excluded from the discussions, even though the COVID-19 considerably worsened the situation of the SEE countries (e.g. through lack of support and the weakening of the domestic economic sector). **As finding a common way out of the crisis** has become an essential issue for everyone, 8 regional think-tanks (Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, Institute for Development and International Relations, Central European Institute of Asian Studies, Centre for Social Innovation, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Cooperation and Development Institute, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies and Centre for International Relations together with the crowd knowledge platform [weTHINK.eu](https://www.wethink.eu)) decided to start a **bottom up initiative** in order to offer a fresh and regional view on the post-COVID-19 era.

The goal of the initiative weBuildBackSmart is to build an inclusive bottom-up initiative, collecting the opinions of all strategy makers over the SEE to continuously develop a joint strategy policy roadmap. Strategy makers are companies, policy makers, NGOs, Academia, social partners and interested THINKERS. Through a cocktail of research findings, expert interviews and roundtable discussions, the multi-stakeholder participants provide valuable insights into what both the EU and SEE countries should focus on in the months and years ahead.



Indeed, Southeastern European countries may face the worst economic performance since the 2008/2009 crisis. Fiscal deficits, high dependence on specific sectors, inadequate quality of the digital structure, lack of employment prospects, hybrid governance patterns and new geopolitical realities are just some of the worrying trends that the founding partners of the initiative together with weTHINK.eu have reflected on preparing the policy roadmap. In developing the policy roadmap, the four thematic areas of geopolitics, the economy, the rule of law and democracy, and the consideration of a social dimension were identified. Based on this, important measures and key strategies were outlined, which should be groundbreaking for both the Southeastern European countries and the EU to act after the COVID-19 crisis. The debate on the EU's credibility was particularly vivid during the debate on geopolitical implications, where **Dr. Ana-Maria Boromisa** from Institute for Development and International Relations in Zagreb argued that "symbolic actions can sometimes create trust, which can be effective in some cases". This statement was further elaborated by **Mag. Philipp Brugner, BA**, of the Centre for Social Innovation and **Dr. Alfred Gerstl** from Central European Institute of Asian Studies, who highlighted that the EU's actions will be judged upon the steps that all the EU member states are taking right now. "The potential hesitation of the EU to help the SEE countries could harm the EU's long-term reputation", concluded **Brugner**.

In discussing economic and social issues, the main concerns were unemployment, digital infrastructure and the European Green Deal. The latter refers to a new growth strategy of the EU with the overarching aim of making Europe the first climate neutral continent by 2050. As the European Green Deal will be supported with the Just Transition Mechanism, the green transition intended shall be facilitated in an inclusive manner with a strong reference to leaving no one behind principle.

"The EU funding in these times should also include the underprivileged and marginalised groups in the region", says **Inva Nela** from the Cooperation and Development Institute. At the same time, "we should not neglect the questions of the presence of authoritarian patterns, the fragile media landscape and the imprisoned state institutions", argues **Dr. Luisa Chiodi** of the Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso. In line with this, policy experts outlined several policy measures in order to actively engage in post-COVID-19 activities. **In doing so, the EU should follow the narrative of national ownership through supporting bottom-up initiatives of civil society organisations and citizens-led media outlets to ensure a stable and authentic future for the region. Other important policy measures include investments in innovation** and technology sector via Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans and the European Green Deal, further integration into the common EU market, tailor-made projects for institution-building initiatives and post-pandemic programming in order to also reach the vulnerable and marginalised groups.

The meeting of the various actors and the development of the policy roadmap provided a good insight into the current situation of the Southeastern European states. **At the same time, this project is an excellent example of internal European cooperation and shows outstandingly elaborated results.**



But it doesn't stop here, the founding partners and **weTHINK.eu** are expanding the initiative to include stakeholders and interested **THINKERS** from all the region. Therefore, the founding partners and **weTHINK.eu** are organizing a series of online roundtable discussions throughout the year, focusing on the notion of 'building back better' after the COVID-19, understood mainly through the sustainability paradigm. The first round of discussion will **bring together all relevant stakeholders** in order to look into the circular economy as a practical means to achieve climate and sustainability targets on the ground. We want to be the guiding voice for fostering an enabling environment by **collecting innovative ideas to build the future** and keep the communication going. Are you interested in building a better future? To help us change the world, register your insitutions or yourself on the **weTHINK.eu** to stay informed about the further process and to register for participation (<https://wethink.eu/roadmap>). ←

About weTHINK.eu

weTHINK.eu is the first online social network and crowd knowledge platform for strategy development, which aims to revolutionise the development of strategies for a stronger Europe. For this purpose, **weTHINK.eu** connects influential Strategy Makers such as ministry officials, chambers of commerce, trade unions, interested individuals and companies to solve European problems together.

[The full document is available here](#)

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