

Young Generations for the New Balkans

Vision 2030

Towards Alternative Horizons

Report Brussels

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In December 2019, we had another possibility to present our initiative *Young Generations for the Balkans - Vision 2030* by visiting European Union institutions in Brussels. We had two days of fruitful meetings at the European Parliament and the European Commission, exchanging views on areas ranging from the state of democratic freedom in the region to education policies and student performance in the Western Balkans Six. Furthermore, we presented a policy paper that has been developed as a result of this initiative, which, over the last two years, has grown to include 25 members coming from all six EU-aspirant countries plus Croatia.

Our meetings in Brussels proved the EU Parliament's and the European Commission's steadfast commitment to the European integration of the Western Balkans, despite the recent setback in this process in October 2019, when the decision to open the long awaited accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania was blocked by France, the Netherlands and Denmark.

2020: New opportunities

Our meetings made clear that the upcoming year 2020 offers a number of opportunities to reinvigorate the integration process. Those opportunities come not without their own challenges and therefore need to be carefully considered.

First, Croatia is holding the presidency of the European Union in the first half of 2020. Zagreb has already declared the European integration of the Western Balkans to be its number one external policy priority. The Western Balkans Summit will supposedly be held in May and some significant progress is expected to happen by that time, including the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania, as well as visa liberalization with Kosovo. It is nevertheless important for the EU and its member states to be vocal about the setbacks in democratic freedoms that Croatia itself currently experiences. Lack of reaction to these negative trends sets a bad precedent for other EU aspirant countries in the Balkans.

Secondly, while the French veto for North Macedonia and the French, Dutch and Danish vetoes for Albania certainly undermined the EU's credibility in the region, the discussion about these member states' decision helped bring the European enlargement back to the top of the EU agenda. The enlargement process, its positive aspects and deficiencies are being widely discussed across the Union and beyond. In this respect, the French proposal of an enlargement process reform has been one of the most discussed ones.

It is clear from that document that the French government sets the priority on the rule of law in the Western Balkans Six and conditions any further progress on the integration path on the adoption and implementation of the European law in this area. While rule of law is indeed a special area of concern in the region, with many countries, such as Serbia or Montenegro, backsliding in this respect, it is not possible to make progress in one area of the European *acquis* without working simultaneously on many others. In other words, the French proposal sees the European integration as a linear process where chapters of *acquis communautaire* can be closed one after another. However, as many interlocutors and participants put it, it does not work this way in reality. Progress on different chapters of the European law must happen in parallel. For example, one cannot complete the law and justice reform without starting reforms in the economic or environmental sectors. In addition, there are concerns about how the French proposal for the enlargement process reform might complicate and prolong it by opening further possibilities for Member States to veto the whole process at every new step.

A third positive aspect is that 2020 brings for the Western Balkans youth new educational opportunities in the EU. The European Commission is set to double its funding of Erasmus+ programs for this region from EUR 33 million to EUR 66 million. National Erasmus+ offices in the region will further promote these opportunities, thereby reaching out to a broader public. This great support in education and training that the EU provides needs to be further enhanced by necessary reforms in the education system at home.

Negative trends in the Western Balkans Six

In their discussions with the Members of the European Parliament and the European Commission representatives, young experts drew attention to a number of negative trends that will become major problems in future if they are not addressed already today. The most worrisome trend is the **democratic backsliding in many countries of the region**. Journalists are attacked and threatened for expressing opinions critical of the government. In Serbia, for example, the government's de facto monopoly on television coverage creates erroneous narratives about the role of the EU and its relations with Serbia. It is a common misperception in Serbia that Russia and China are the main foreign contributors to the Serbian economy while in reality and over the years it has been the EU. The EU thus needs to focus more on its communication strategy in the Southeastern Neighbourhood.

In this context, we also had a discussion with leaders of the Serbian opposition which happened to pay a visit to the European Parliament at the same time as our visit took place. We discussed the intention of the opposition to boycott the next parliamentary elections. We fully shared their criticism of the lack of democratic behavior in Serbia, but many of our group had doubts about the usefulness of boycotting the forthcoming elections. However, it is also a responsibility of the EU to make it clear to President Vučić and his government, that the authoritarian way to rule the country - including manipulating the media - is not in compliance with the EU principles and values. Even if progress is made on the issue of Serbian-Kosovar reconciliation, the EU cannot turn a blind eye to the democratic backslides in domestic policy, especially considering that Serbia and Montenegro are accession candidates.



A point was raised about the ongoing democratic deficiencies in EU countries, like Hungary and Poland. The situation there is another reason why enlargement is not popular these days. Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán is a good friend of Serbian president Vučić, former North-Macedonian leader Nikola Gruevski was granted asylum in Budapest even though he was convicted of corruption in North Macedonia. In addition, the new EU commissioner for enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, is claimed to be a loyal companion of Viktor Orbán. These facts are worrisome for many people active in civil society and endanger their efforts to promote democracy and European values in the region.

Another concern is an enormous outflow of (educated) people from the region which migrate primarily to Western Europe in search of a better life. In this sense, European enlargement to the Balkans is already happening. While the countries themselves are not members of the EU, young people from the region emigrate to the EU in large numbers, prompting many observers to note ironically that if the EU doesn't come to the Western Balkans, the Western Balkans will come to the EU.

Unlike some decades ago, 'better life' is increasingly being defined today not in the material terms (people do not migrate primarily because of higher salaries), but as a demand for a stable political system, just and transparent public institutions, livable healthy environment, proper education and corresponding job opportunities. The governments in the region should thus look into creating incentives for professionals to stay in or return to their home countries. This can be done through special tax incentives, more favorable conditions for running businesses and adjusting education systems to the

demands of the labor market. The EU, in its turn, can encourage and offer its support to the regional governments in promoting circular migration among the qualified workers.



Education is a further problematic area in the Western Balkans. The latest PISA 2018 test findings conducted by the OECD place four out of the six countries in the region at the bottom of the list. In Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia every second school student is functionally illiterate, while in Serbia and Montenegro it is every third one. One of the consequences of the failing educational system is the mismatch between what it offers and demand from the markets. Despite numerous pressing concerns, the youth from the region feel hopeful about their future. They are ambitious and full of ideas, although sometimes they have wrong perceptions of what is possible. Thus, recent polls in North Macedonia indicated that about 60 percent of young people expect their country to become a part of the European Union. About 70 percent of those think that it will happen before 2025. This is a very unrealistic assessment that will lead to disappointment and possibly even higher motivation to migrate abroad in the very near future.



What can the EU do?

In order to create space for young people to realize their ambitions and ideas in the region, without leaving it for the rest of their lives, there is a number of specific issues that can be addressed by the EU as well as regional policy makers already today. In general, political will of the governments in the region is imperative for any genuine reform to be implemented. The EU should encourage this change in the attitude among those governments who still ‘tick the boxes’ just to showcase the result on paper but are not really willing to implement thorough changes. There are also a series of measures that the EU can undertake relatively independently from the regional players.

- **‘Sticks and carrots’** of the integration process should be spread along the whole way and not be left until its very end. This will make more visible to the public in the region whether their governments are indeed delivering on the promises. It will also establish specific linkage between individual reforms/policies and rewards (or lack thereof) from the EU.

- **Benchmarks** for measuring progress must be specified by the EU in order to prevent ‘ticking boxes’ on paper with no real changes in the lives of the citizens.
- **Transparency** is crucial throughout the process. **Civil society** should be meaningfully included in all sorts of debates and consultations during the policy formulation and implementation as well as throughout the European integration process. It is also important for the EU to intensify its contacts with experts from the region to be able to receive independent from the government assessments of the situation on the ground.
- Western Balkan countries should be invited to the ‘**Conference on the Future of Europe**’. Such invitation would serve as a practical step towards a joint discussion and development of policies that the Balkan countries will have to comply with, if they are to become fully fledged members of the EU. Their presence and active engagement at the conference would also demonstrate the seriousness of the EU commitment to the enlargement.
- The discussion initiated by France to adapt the **methodology of the enlargement process**, even though welcome, should not mislead by creating an impression that the methodology itself is the main obstacle. The democratic situation in Hungary and Poland would be the same, regardless of the methodology. The most important issue to address is the **lack of political will** of the governing parties to deliver responsibly on their commitments.
- **Regional cooperation** must be fostered. The Croatian EU presidency and its focus on the Western Balkans can become an important step in this regard, considering that Croatia already is an EU member. In this context, it would be helpful also to get Slovenia more involved in the process - another EU member and neighbor of the region.
- In the field of **education**, exchanges and training programs for students and teachers are crucial and EU financial commitment is commendable in this respect. National governments should further encourage educational institutions to participate in exchange programs, particularly **Erasmus+** and **Erasmus Mundus**. Cases of plagiarism among university professors must be addressed seriously.
- The European Union and the regional governments should jointly look into the ways how to involve **Western Balkans diaspora** in efforts to improve life in their region of origin. Mapping of diasporas in Europe, their organization, set skills and interests would be useful for understanding their potential role in the development of the Western Balkans.
- The Western Balkan countries should be included in the **European Green Deal**. Ursula von der Leyen’s speech to the European Parliament announcing the Deal is commendable and indeed addresses the key challenge to tackling climate change, namely reconciling economic growth with sustainability. The Western Balkans are in the immediate geographical proximity to the EU. As climate change knows no borders, the environmental situation in this region should be of immediate concern to the EU. According to the data of WHO, half of Europe’s ten most-polluted cities are in the Western Balkans. Therefore, including this region in the European Green Deal – the region that is also set to become a part of the European Union in a not too distant future - is essential to achieve climate neutrality of the continent by 2050.

Our initiative will continue its work throughout 2020, bring our fresh ideas to the Balkan region itself as well as to further capitals in Europe.

You can find out more about our previous activities from this [progress report](#).

You can listen to our experts in these [series of interviews](#).



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