

Growing Together or Moving Apart?

The Western Balkans in the European Union

Twenty years ago, the Zagreb Summit was supposed to pave the way for the six Western Balkans states to join the European Union (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia). Closely linked to the prospect of accession was the hope that a crisis-ridden era could be left behind by fostering political and economic reforms. Two decades later, however, the future of the region seems increasingly uncertain. Opposition against further enlargement has grown among EU member states. This reservation was, for example, expressed by the French President Emmanuel Macron's veto against the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and Northern Macedonia in December 2019. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the situation. Chances are high that the 2020s will be mainly characterized by revanchism, ethno-nationalism, and authoritarian developments. Furthermore, brain-drain and disinformation are considered to weaken perspectives of future prosperity.

Considering these developments, the Southeast Europe Association in cooperation with the Protestant Academy Loccum has organized an expert conference from September 7th to 9th 2020, entitled "Growing Together or Moving Apart? - The Western Balkans in the European Union". While taking into account the various challenges within and among the countries of the region as well as with and inside the European Union, the conference pursued a forward-looking approach and developed ideas to address the increasing alienation between the Western Balkans and the EU. Thereby, together with practitioners and experts coming from the countries of the region and across the EU, the discussion focused on three intertwined challenges: the search for a new European approach for the region, authoritarian rule, and ongoing ethno-political cleavages.

■ Democracy – Strengthening Democratic Change

The recent EU strategy for the Western Balkans issued in Spring 2018 states that the countries of the region “show clear elements of state capture, including links with organized crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration, as well as a strong entanglement of public and private interests“. Authoritarian control of the states and societies in the region are widespread and they have become more severe in recent years – apart from some positive development such as in Northern Macedonia. Therefore, strengthening potentials for the democratic change in the region is seen as a key objective for the EU.

The participants discussed different approaches regarding this issue. One option is to shift the focus of cooperation from political elites to civil society actors. They are considered an immense resource for social change and provide the necessary expertise for that transformation. In some cases, they play an important role as an oppositional counterweight to the governing parties where governments completely take over the parliamentary work. The EU should therefore strive to institutionalize the dialogue between political and civil society actors.

However, other participants see the civil society actor’s position outside the parliamentary process as a major weakness. They point out that only a few of them really work in cooperation with parliamentary representatives, but most do not and so face difficulties to assert their concerns politically. It is therefore important to pave the way for multiple actors to enter parliament. This should not be a matter of taking over political power, but rather of ensuring everyday parliamentary procedures, such as committees of inquiry. At the same time, it would provide those actors with a more stable foundation for their work, as it would enable them to arrange their funding independently of EU subsidies. In this way, the accusation of foreign interference could be addressed simultaneously, as political opponents often use the support of external actors as an argument to discredit civil society actors by questioning their autonomy.

However, for the vast majority of participants, the EU cannot bypass government actors anyway. Rather, they argue that a change in the political system should be achieved through gradual steps. The proposals on the table include, for example, better equipment for regional parliamentarians to further professionalize their work. In addition, the opposition in the Balkan states should be held more accountable to deliver political alternatives by finding ways to integrate them into the legislative process. Other proposals concern internal party democratization. For example, a shift to an electoral system with open lists should give the party base more influence vis-à-vis party leaders when it comes to occupying important posts. In addition, the terms of office for these posts should be limited in order to prevent political power from accumulating too much around individuals. Another important step for the experts is to increase transparency with regard to party financing.

Many experts believe that the EU could support these processes much more. So far, they argue, it has made little use of its leverage in this area. On the contrary, it is considered to support political elites by ensuring positive publicity through meetings with political leaders, which is especially delicate before elections. Moreover, participants argue that the EU focuses too much on informal actors. Although these actors usually have the political decision-making power, this approach undermines formally responsible institutions. Involving them more closely in consultations would significantly strengthen their influence. Moreover, it is especially important for EU parliamentary groups to take more decisive action against illiberal parties. This could be achieved on the one hand by stricter entrance requirements, and on the other hand by drawing and adhering to red lines.

■ “Togetherness” – Dialogue and Reconciliation

Despite numerous attempts to reconcile, many intra- and inter-societal conflicts from the 1990s remain virulent in the Western Balkans. They slow down economic progress, burden the political sphere, and are often named as one of the major obstacles to the European integration of the region. Considerable efforts were undertaken in the past with projects and initiatives reaching from transitional justice, cultural exchanges, youth contacts, dealing with the past projects, and bilateral disputes reconciliation.

According to the participants, however, the political willingness of regional elites for reconciliation is still lacking. The EU must therefore do far more naming and shaming in order to build pressure for action on these elites. Specifically, the experts demand that the ICTY's verdicts should be fully recognized and further legal proceedings should be initiated. However, the EU can only be credible in this regard if the member states internally adopt a unified position on the regional conflicts, especially in view of Kosovo.

In the eyes of the participants, a major motivation for building togetherness is the need to overcome future challenges - such as climate change and poverty reduction - only by working together. Furthermore, examples from the past have shown time and again that support in the event of natural disasters can send powerful signals of solidarity.

With regard to the population, the development of regional infrastructure could contribute to a greater exchange of people, which in turn would promote togetherness in the region. In addition, participants proposed mandatory civic education in schools to increase the population's awareness for democracy. At the same time, one must be careful not to focus those kinds of programs exclusively on the younger population. In addition to schools, other ways should be found to make such programs accessible to broader sections of society. In general, intergenerational exchange should be given greater emphasis in project initiatives, especially in reconciliation projects.

According to the experts, there are numerous actors in the region who show the political willingness to reconcile the populations. In this context, Northern Macedonia in particular is increasingly becoming the focus of discussion. It is crucial to support these actors and to recognize their efforts appropriately.

■ Europe – On A Search for A New EU Approach Towards Western Balkans

The European approach towards Western Balkan is in crisis. Emmanuel Macron's veto to the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia in December last year brought the EU's strategy to transform the region to a dead end and raised the question how the Union and its Member States wish to progress on the matter in future. In the participants' view, answering this question requires an intensive discussion of the basic understanding of what the EU should be and which ideas we associate with its enlargement. According to certain participants, however, this debate is increasingly overshadowed by questions of technical details, which increasingly detaches the enlargement process from the reality on the ground.

In their eyes, enlargement is primarily a political process and therefore includes much more than merely the methodology. Although the participants consider the handling of technical issues to be important, these measures would only be effective if they were based on a coherent political strategy. Therefore, a political willingness is required to engage in a debate on the future direction of the EU. Some experts emphasize that this discussion must be conducted not only in political institutions but also in broader parts of the Union's societies. Ultimately, the enlargement would require the consent of EU's citizens. The issues surrounding the

enlargement process should therefore receive much more attention in the social discourse. The goal of this dialogue should be to crystallize a commonly shared vision of a European project. One must think concretely about how and with which agenda this discourse should be conducted.

According to the experts, a particular focus should be placed on new societal challenges. Climate change, for example, is a common problem that can only be solved through joint action. In view of such challenges, increased cooperation of the European Union with states in the region is considered essential. However, not only states but also civil society actors, such as activists, should be much more involved in this discourse. Despite those upcoming challenges, it is still central for the EU to implement projects for poverty reduction and social welfare. Ultimately, it is crucial to strengthen shared values both in the Western Balkans and within the Union. In that regard, the Union should become more explicit in its demands on the governments and advise them even more strongly on concrete recommendations for change.

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The views expressed in this conference report do not necessarily represent the position of all conference participants or their institutions. While the report conveys the main themes, conclusions, and recommendations, it is not a full account of the very rich and productive discussions held at the Protestant Academy Loccum. It aims to highlight the main points of convergence and divergence among the participants and to stimulate further work on Europe's Iran policy.

About the Protestant Academy Loccum

Conferences at the Protestant Academy Loccum provide forums for open-minded discussions on urgent and pressing issues. They endeavor to establish dialogues between actors from different fields and backgrounds with the intention to provide impetus to "think out of the box". The Protestant Academy Loccum hosts meetings over 48 hours/two nights for between 60 to 80 participants and is open to those with the expertise to share or an interest in the subject. To allow a free exchange of thoughts, the conferences are off-camera and off-record and strictly follow the Chatham House rules which allow participants to use the information received freely but neither reveal the identity nor the affiliation of the speakers or any other participant.

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