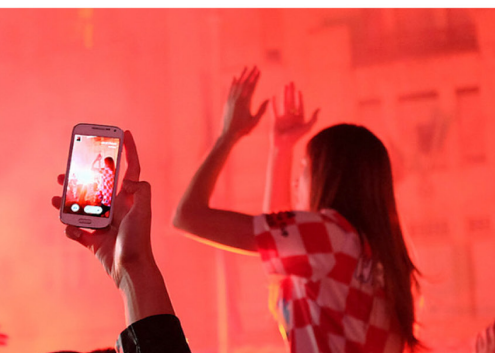


WINTER 2018

# EU-WESTERN BALKANS

ENLARGEMENT, INTEGRATION AND THE CHALLENGE  
OF TRANSFORMATION

REPORT



In association with



With the support of



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>FOSTERING A TRULY CREDIBLE REGION-WIDE ENLARGEMENT PROCESS</b>	<b>4</b>
EU-Western Balkans: still complicated	4
Walking the talk on connectivity	6
Role of media and grassroots organisations	10
<b>CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>YOUTH DELEGATION</b>	<b>14</b>

## FOSTERING A TRULY CREDIBLE REGION-WIDE ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

**“The European Commission is doing everything possible to support the Western Balkans countries’ economic reforms – both private and public – and in fields like the rule of law, democracy and fighting corruption. Their challenge is broader transformation – choosing to align with EU culture and politics and so on – and not just piecemeal reforms”**

**Christian Danielsson**

European Commission Director-General for  
Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations

The European Union promised to open its doors to the Western Balkans 15 years ago and recently recommitted, at a meeting in Sofia, to making this happen, as part of what European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker calls a “step-by-step” approach. Although the region now benefits from EU pre-accession funds and several programmes, including new ‘flagship initiatives’, no country in the region expects to become an EU member before 2025. The Western Balkan region is still too fragile and still struggling with reconciliation three decades after the civil war. It also faces new challenges including rising populism, resurgent nationalism, and a democracy deficit.

New political momentum is building for stronger ties between the EU and Western Balkans, but the region still has a long way to go before it can join the EU. This was the conclusion of the Friends of Europe’s 2018 Balkan European Policy Summit, held in Brussels on 4 December. The event featured a range of different state and non-state actors, with a stimulating debate on the region’s opportunities and challenges.

Shada Islam, Director of Europe and Geopolitics at Friends of Europe and moderator for the summit’s three sessions, acknowledged the situation in the Western Balkans is “muddled and muddled.” However, she outlined an optimistic scenario in which, by 2025, Macedonia and Greece resolve their name dispute, Kosovo and Serbia normalise relations and other regional disputes are settled. Moreover, such a case would see Montenegro and Serbia gain EU membership status. By this time also, the region could have embarked on sustainable reforms as regards rule of law, democracy, fundamental freedom, anti-corruption drives, and media freedom. But all of this required hard work and effort.

### EU-WESTERN BALKANS: STILL COMPLICATED

There is definitely a new momentum between the EU and the Western Balkans, said Christian Danielsson, European Commission Director-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. According to the Director-General, the EU is ideally placed to capitalise on that “window of opportunity”, including the growing political willingness shown by the recent Bulgarian and current Austrian presidencies of the Council of the EU to support the region’s transition.

“The European Commission is doing everything possible to support the Western Balkans countries’ economic reforms – both private and public – and in fields like the rule of law, democracy and fighting corruption. Their challenge is broader transformation – choosing to align with EU culture and politics and so on – and not just piecemeal reforms,” said Mr Danielsson.

That transformation is making good progress in Albania, which is notably engaged in a radical and unique judicial vetting process, with EU support, to tackle corruption and violence. Etilda Gjonaj, the country’s Minister of Justice, said that 97% of Albanians had called for a new justice system: “It hasn’t been easy, as we are making legal and constitutional changes and designing a new architecture for our institutions. But we are seeing tangible results – including the removal of corrupted judges and prosecutors.” She added that EU political support will be needed to speed up these and other reforms in the country. More broadly, the session’s participants agreed that Albania’s judicial reforms should serve as a useful reform model for neighbouring countries. It could also underpin a region-wide drive for more transparency – a vital element for all future Western Balkans cooperation.

Progress was also highlighted by Radmila Šekerinska, Minister of Defence of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). She said the recent vote to rename the country the ‘Republic of North Macedonia’ will help improve its relations with Bulgaria, Romania and of course Greece. “The process is not complete but solving the name issue is a huge breakthrough – because the political cost of doing nothing has been enormous,” she admitted. The country now needs to tackle other issues, including EU and NATO membership. “Both these partners must also play their part,” she added.

“The EU is the light at the end of the tunnel for us,” said Dhurata Hoxha, Minister of European Integration of Kosovo. She said transformations in her country and across the region will help citizens and improve their lives. However, she called for a legally binding agreement, which would pave the way for Kosovo’s membership of the EU and NATO. In her view, there are also still key issues to deal with in the region – such as non-trade barriers to the movement of goods and people. Visa liberalisation is another challenge for Kosovo. “We have now fulfilled all 95 conditions for that, but we are still the only European country where citizens cannot move freely around Europe. We need a credible process and dialogue with all partners on this issue,” she said.

Philip Reeker, Ambassador and Civilian Deputy to the Commander and Foreign Policy Adviser of the US European Command (EUCOM), emphasised how the United States – working with the EU – is also eager to see progress in the Western Balkans. “We’re very engaged in the region at all levels – including diplomatically, economically and in a military capacity,” he said. He also praised Macedonian leaders for having the courage to deal with the country’s name issue.

**“We are making legal and constitutional changes and designing a new architecture for our institutions”**

**Etilda Gjonaj**

Albania’s Minister of Justice



## **“It’s also about free movement of goods and people, which are vital for a region like ours to grow”**

### **Radosav Babic**

Director-General for Investments, SME Development and EU Funds Management at the Ministry of Economy of Montenegro

While supporting EU accession for the Western Balkans countries, Mirjana Spoljaric Egger, Assistant Secretary-General and Director of the Regional Bureau for European and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), underlined the importance of their development being sustainable. She said the 2030 Agenda's SDG 16, on justice for all and transparency, is especially important for the region. Ms Egger outlined three approaches – integrative, sub-regional cooperation, and innovative – to renew cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans. For instance, reconciliation is a key issue for any cooperation among the region's countries.

Reconciliation and security are very important, agreed a Bosnian Muslim woman in the audience during the session's questions and answers portion. She said her community is tackling these challenges and called on the EU to continue supporting initiatives aimed at preventing radicalisation and extremism region-wide.

In answer to an audience comment about NATO and the EU seemingly being “moving targets” for Macedonia in particular, Mr Reeker disagreed. He added that the country's name change should also make membership of both far easier.

Mr Danielsson concluded the first session by saying that the EU is focused on areas such as regional cooperation, transformation, transparency, deradicalisation, and communication.

## **WALKING THE TALK ON CONNECTIVITY**

Introducing the session, Shada Islam noted how the Western Balkans stand to benefit from better connectivity and entrepreneurship. Both are key for economic growth, jobs and development– just as they are in the EU.

Participants overwhelmingly expressed support for greater regional connectivity. This can be physical (transport, energy, etc.), digital (e.g. new initiatives for open data access or empowering women), or cross-border between people. “Connectivity is not just about infrastructure, important though that is,” said Radosav Babic, Director-General for Investments, SME Development and EU Funds Management at the Ministry of Economy of Montenegro. “It’s also about free movement of goods and people, which are vital for a region like ours to grow. We would like to see more cooperation on that with the EU.”

Mr Babic noted how goods that get blocked at borders in the Western Balkans discourage potential investors from coming into the region. He added that SMEs are just as important to the region as they are in the EU, hence for example Montenegro's drive to make it easier to set up new firms with a one-stop shop.

“Enlargement is about connectivity, whether among countries,

policies, in a single market or for values and security,” argued Majlinda Bregu, Secretary-General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). That is why better connectivity – which she called a mindset dependent on political willingness – is key to the Western Balkans’ EU accession. A vital part of that connectivity is regional cooperation, but she believes this is not going well. After all, while some three-quarters of the region’s exports are to the EU, only 10% are within the region. Ms Bregu also noted many challenges to connectivity and cooperation across the Western Balkans, linked to weakness or fragility in their economies, institutions, civil society, media and judiciary.

“Connectivity is the visible side of enlargement,” said Tanja Fajon, Member of the European Parliament’s Delegation for relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, and Trustee of Friends of Europe. She highlighted new and improved infrastructure as well as more exchange of students between countries as examples of enhanced and visible connectivity, helping to bring a region together.

Nonetheless, Ms Fajon warned that the Western Balkans face a lack of funds, affecting projects, infrastructure and institutions. In her view, the region is still very divided and could even be said to be going backwards. Particularly worrying are youth unemployment and the brain drain to Western Europe. She acknowledged the EU as the region’s most important strategic partner but said the bloc must show more “serious commitment” to the Western Balkans or risk other big players becoming more attractive to the region’s leaders.

“Connectivity is important to us too,” said Linda Van Gelder, Regional Director for the Western Balkans at the World Bank. However, according to a recent World Bank study on connectivity, this region ranks low (88th) on a worldwide scale and has only grown by 10% since 2000. She pointed to four areas that are essential for better connectivity region-wide: transport, energy, digital, and skills. “On the transport side, there is a need for better management and maintenance – and not just new infrastructure. The World Bank is also helping the region to create a ‘Balkans Digital Highway’, such as better Internet and more access to it,” she said. Lastly, Ms Van Gelder noted the need for much more investment in the education and skills needed to improve critical human capital in the region.

Addressing a question from the audience, panellists again acknowledged the importance of liberalising visas for Kosovars. To a comment that EU funds are insufficient for the region (“we will need another 50 years to catch up with today’s EU members”), Radosav Babic said that the EU’s funds for competitiveness and innovation are actually very useful to Montenegro and are put to good use. He said Montenegro is working with Slovenia to determine how best to use EU funds.

Ms Van Gelder said she would also like to see countries in the region adopt a reform agenda to improve their public spending. Ms Fajon said the EU has plans to increase the Instrument for Pre-Accession

**“There is a need for much more investment in the education and skills needed to improve critical human capital in the region”**

**Linda Van Gelder**

Regional Director for the Western Balkans at the World Bank





1. **Dhurata Hoxha**, Minister of European Integration of Kosovo\*; **Christian Danielsson**, Director-General, European Commission Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
2. **Blerta Thaçi**, Executive Director of Open Data Kosovo\*; **Jasna Jelusic**, Head of the Western Balkans Task Force at the European External Action Service (EEAS)
3. **Radosav Babic**, Director-General for Investments, SME Development and EU Funds Management at the Ministry of Economy of Montenegro; **Linda Van Gelder**, Regional Director for the Western Balkans at the World Bank
4. **Majlinda Bregu**, Secretary-General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) ; **Tanja Fajon**, Member of the European Parliament Delegation for relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo\*; and Trustee of Friends of Europe



5. **Mirjana Spoljaric Egger**, Assistant Secretary-General and Director of the Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ; **Christian Danielsson**, Director-General, European Commission Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiation; **Etilda Gjonaj**, Minister of Justice of the Republic of Albania
6. **Shada Islam**, Director of Europe & Geopolitics at Friends of Europe; **Zdravka Busic**, State Secretary for Political Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia; **Duro Blanuša**, Secretary-General of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)







7. **Mirjana Spoljaric Egger**, Assistant Secretary-General and Director of the Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); **Christian Danielsson**, Director-General, European Commission Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiation; **Etilda Gjonaj**, Minister of Justice of the Republic of Albania; **Radmila Sekerinska Jankovska** Minister, Ministry of Defence, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM); **Philip Reeker**, Ambassador and Civilian Deputy to the Commander and Foreign Policy Adviser of the US European Command (EUCOM); **Dhurata Hoxha**, Minister of European Integration of Kosovo\*

8. **David Chmelik**, President, Slavonic Europe Movement



\* For the United Nations Development Programme, references to Kosovo in this document accordingly shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999);  
For the European Union, this designation used is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UN Security Council resolution 1244/99 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

## **“Our region needs better education and media literacy, especially to help young readers distinguish between fact and fiction”**

### **Zdravka Basic**

State Secretary for Political Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia

Assistance (IPA) funds, currently €2.9bn for 2014-2020, for EU candidate countries. However, they must improve their “absorption capacity” for these funds and fight corruption. The RCC is ready to move forward and coordinate the region’s agenda, said Ms Bregu: “We depend on the EU’s political commitments and the support of institutional partners like the World Bank.” She also noted a lack of connectivity between municipalities in the region.

## **ROLE OF MEDIA AND GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS**

Kicking off the third session, Shada Islam noted how a free and independent press as well as civil society are so important to both regions and their component countries. Yet in the Western Balkans, as elsewhere in Europe, they are both under pressure. “It’s not uncommon for page 1 to splash misleading views, while good news is buried on page 12,” she said.

“Fake and distorted news haunt us every day,” said Zdravka Basic, State Secretary for Political Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia. She said this news threatens the process of reconciliation – which is so important today in the Western Balkans. “It distorts reality and represses trust in media. That’s why media owners must be careful to avoid fake news. Our region needs better education and media literacy, especially to help young readers distinguish between fact and fiction.”

“People in the Western Balkans need access to manipulation-free independent media. If well-informed, they will be more involved in regional democracy,” added Jasna Jelic, herself a former journalist and now Head of the Western Balkans Task Force at the European External Action Service. She said the EU is engaged in positive efforts to tackle a shrinking media space, with all its inherent dangers for peace and democracy.

For instance, in consultation with the Western Balkans, the EU is supporting the region’s public broadcasters. It is also helping free and independent media, including investigative journalism, via its media freedom guidelines and the European Endowment for Democracy. Lastly, the EU has several tools to monitor attacks on journalists and is training regional judges on European case law and media. UNESCO is assisting with media literacy.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are also countering disinformation campaigns by working on building regional cooperation links necessary for greater connectivity. Duro Blanuša, Secretary-General of the Regional Youth Cooperation Council (RYCO), said his organisation runs 35 projects focused on youth cooperation, including inter-Balkan student exchanges. “Over 1,000 young people are meeting up with one another, fostering goodwill across borders and partnerships,” he said. Noting that the main aim is region-wide reconciliation because two-thirds of youth there still have negative

attitudes to their neighbours, he added: “It’s key to invest in human infrastructure too, via CSOs and not just grassroots organisations.” More generally, he highlighted the good work carried out through the EU’s Berlin Process for future enlargement of the bloc.

Several members of a youth delegation in attendance, organised and selected by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS), have been involved in RYCO projects and talked about their own positive experiences. These included an exchange programme for Western Balkans and Japanese youth, and a project designed to help young people from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro to deal with the past and to reject violence and hate speech in the media.

The digital world is also playing its role in bridging old divides. According to Blerta Thaçi, Executive Director of Open Data Kosovo, this open data portal is crucial for enabling all citizens – including journalists and business people – to access data. “Three-quarters of our country’s population is under 30, so we need to invest more in the digital tools that will give them the opportunity to contribute to society,” she said. The portal is now also helping young women to get into technology and boosting start-ups across the country.

During questions and answers, there were several recommendations on ways to improve the media, CSOs and regional cooperation. They included equipping young journalists to use data; sharing more positive stories in the media; helping young people to have “inquisitive minds and a desire to get to know their regional neighbours better”; and ending the religious segregation of 54 schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Wrapping up the summit, Shada Islam said the EU-Western Balkans relationship is complicated, but there is a perceptible “change dynamic” in the air.

**“Three-quarters of our country’s population is under 30, so we need to invest more in the digital tools that will give them the opportunity to contribute to society”**

**Blerta Thaçi**

Executive Director of Open Data Kosovo



# CONCLUSIONS

These conclusions draw on the debates and ideas presented by speakers and participants during the 2018 EU-Western Balkans Summit.

## 1. ACCELERATE RECONCILIATION EFFORTS

Ongoing border and name disputes continue to hinder political and social progress in the Western Balkans and prevent peace-building in the region. Recent efforts, such as the Prespa agreement offering a solution to the name dispute between Macedonia and Greece, are important developments to a broader peaceful transformation, but further steps need to be taken. Such efforts should ideally be initiated and directly negotiated by the countries concerned, but international organisations and institutions can help to broker such initiatives. As such, important partners such as the European Union and NATO should not lose their interest in the region or decrease their commitment.

## 2. FOCUS ON TRANSFORMATION

Reconciliation among countries in the region is closely linked to the acceleration of political and economic transformation. While the focus has so far been on reforms, it is important now to emphasise the need for more far-reaching transformation as part of efforts being made by Western Balkan countries to become members of the EU and NATO. These transformation efforts need to target fields like the rule of law, democracy, the fight against corruption, media freedom and a drive for region-wide transparency. They require a strong commitment to align with EU culture, politics and values.

## 3. IMPLEMENT AGENDA 2030

Given the importance to the region of issues like the rule of law, democracy, anti-corruption and media freedom, governments must focus on implementing the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with particular regard for SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions. This requires the involvement of not just states and governments institutions but also business, civil society and other non-governmental actors. The emphasis should be on national actions but also include policies implemented on a regional level.



#### **4. INCREASE REGIONAL COOPERATION**

Increased regional cooperation within the Western Balkans is crucial if the region is to meet EU criteria for membership. However, although cooperation and exchanges between the Western Balkan countries and the EU have increased and improved, such interaction within the region is still very poor, with little or no free movement of people and goods. If the region is to attract further investments in crucial infrastructure, especially in the transport, energy and digital sectors as well as the empowerment of young people and women across the region, cross-border cooperation is a must.

#### **5. INVEST IN YOUTH AND EDUCATION**

Young societies in the Western Balkans offer an enormous potential for economic growth and social development. However, the high levels of youth unemployment provide little incentives and chances for young professionals to stay in their countries and support the socio-economic development of the region. Hence, it is important to cultivate the existing potential by modernising education systems, investing in new technologies and digital tools, and by empowering young women in particular. Cross-border cooperation between companies and institutions aimed at offering new opportunities for young professionals can also contribute to reconciliation.

#### **6. STRENGTHEN THE MEDIA AND CIVIL SOCIETY**

Progress in the region is also conditional on a free and independent media as well as strong civil societies. In recent years, the level of disinformation has increased all over Europe and countries in the Western Balkans are particularly vulnerable to the impact of fake and distorted news on the reconciliation process. In addition, public broadcasters and investigative journalists must be protected from state-sanctioned violence. Civil society organisations can help foster regional cooperation by sharing information, checking facts and creating mutual understanding. Here, again, the focus must be on the empowerment of young people.

## YOUTH DELEGATION

To improve their chances of EU accession and secure their citizens a more prosperous future, one of the key priorities the Western Balkans need to address are the problems facing their youth, who hold the key to such a future. Persistently high levels of youth unemployment are seen as a direct consequence of the region's difficult economic context, but equally so of its outdated educational systems that fail to deliver to the needs of the labour market. Deeply entrenched regional stereotypes, a lack of awareness of other cultures, demographic changes and a youth 'brain drain' are some of the pieces that make up this complex regional puzzle. Raising awareness about these challenges and including youth in the discussions to help find timely solutions is therefore crucial.

In the context of this annual Balkan Summit, Friends of Europe and its partners have gathered a delegation of Youth representatives from the Western Balkan region, to provide insight and mainstream the issue of Youth throughout the discussions of all three sessions. These delegates actively intervened in sessions and help push the youth agenda across the Western Balkans and the EU forward. Our youth delegates were:

### **AMELA BABAČIĆ**

Adviser of the Office of Bosniak Political Party at the Parliament of Montenegro

### **VLADIMIR BOSHNJAKOVSKI**

Lawyer at Debarliev, Dameski & Kelesoska Attorneys at Law, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)

### **DANIEL EROR**

President and Project Coordinator of Youth for Peace, Bosnia and Herzegovina

### **ĐORDIJA KOVACEVIC**

Private entrepreneur in tourism, Montenegro

### **DEA KRASNIQI**

Senior Administrative Officer in the Cabinet of the Prime Minister, Kosovo\*

### **DARIO PLAVCIC**

Director and Chief Executive of Grad Busovaca Portal, Bosnia and Herzegovina

### **FUSHA RIKELA**

Scientific Researcher for the Transitional Justice project and Representative of the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) presence in Albania

### **NEMANJA ZAVISIC**

Assistant lawyer, Chancellery of Tomic, Vidovic and Kankaras, Serbia

\* For the United Nations Development Programme, references to Kosovo in this document accordingly shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999);  
For the European Union, this designation used is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UN Security Council resolution 1244/99 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

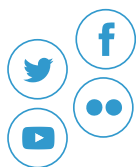




1. **Kezz, aka Tamara Ristic**, Belgrade-based producer, live looping artist, singer-songwriter and a music performer

2. **Pierre Heilbronn**, Vice-President for Policy and Partnerships, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD); **Gwilym Jones**, Head of Brussels Office, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)





## **Friends of Europe**

Connect. Debate. Change.

+32 2 893 98 20

[info@friendsofeurope.org](mailto:info@friendsofeurope.org)

[friendsofeurope.org](http://friendsofeurope.org)

---

Friends of Europe is a leading think-tank that connects people, stimulates debate and triggers change to create a more inclusive, sustainable and forward-looking Europe.