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International Conference

*THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION OF THE
WESTERN BALKANS: RESILIENCE, FAILURES
AND CHALLENGES*

Proceedings/Book of abstracts

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This is an ordinary International Conference in extraordinary global times. The whole world is dealing with the pandemic caused by COVID-19 and here in Albania we have just come out of a very severe lock down that lasted from March to May 2020.

I thought of cancelling this Conference at the very beginning of our preparations. We were facing a lot of insecurities and apparently the guests did not seem very enthusiastic on reaching us in Tirana by June 2020. Then, after contacting the wonderful agents working at the EACEA of the European Commission and after discussing this with my excellent collaborators, I decided to go on. The final activity of the Jean Monnet Module "Resilience and European Integration of the Western Balkans (2017-2020)" should have to go on.

Here we are, gathered online, but still doing what we do best: sharing ideas and discussing on new and old phenomena. I am very thankful to EACEA and the European Commission for the support, to the Rector of the University of Tirana Prof. Mynyr Koni and Mr. Elton Skëndaj, the Head of International Relations Office of the same University, to the Head of our Department, Mrs. Orinda Malltezi for her ongoing support in these three years, to the collaborators of this Jean Monnet Module, my Department colleagues Dhurata Milori and Nysjola Dhoga, to Blerjana Bino from SciDEV for her continuous back-up and to the honourable guests who accepted my invitation to greet the Conference or to participate.

I hope that this pandemic will not prohibit us to go on with our plans and projects!

Although 2020 will be remembered as the year that stole our future, I really wish that this Conference will turn out in being the example of the good will that makes wonders even in difficult times!

I hope good publishings and networks will come out from this final activity of our project!

Klodiana BESHKU

Lecturer at the Department of Political Sciences, University of Tirana.

Coordinator of the Module Jean Monnet "Resilience and European Integration of the Western Balkans (2017-2020)"

VIRTUAL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

The European Integration of the Western Balkans: Resilience, Failures and Challenges

June 11th, 2020

AGENDA

Panel 1: Post COVID 19's implications to the European Integration of the Western Balkans

Moderator: Klodiana Beshku, University of Tirana

- 09:30-09:35 *Welcoming Remarks*
Gentiana Kera, Vice-Rector of University of Tirana
- 09:35-09:40 *Remarks*
HE Luigi Soreca, Ambassador of the Delegation of the European Union to Albania
- 09:40 – 09:50 *European Union and the Western Balkan: State of Affairs after the COVID 19*
Ditmir Bushati, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Albania
- 09:50-10:00 *Enlargement during the Pandemic. Prospects for the Western Balkans*
Florian Bieber, University of Graz
- 10:00-10:10 *Continuing EU enlargement in the time of Corona: great expectations or the end of illusions for the WB*
Enika Abazi, University of Lille
- 10:10 -10:20 *Europeanization without democratization? Exploring subtle and efficient ways to say no to Europa*
Vedran Džihčić, University of Vienna
- 10:20-10:50 Questions and Remarks

Panel 2: Geopolitical Approach of the European Union to the Western Balkans

Moderator: Ph.D. Enika Abazi, Peace Research Institute, Paris, France

- 11:30-11:40 Keynote address: *The role of the Russian Federation in the Western Balkans: the EU perspective*
Doris Wydra, University of Salzburg
- 11:40 – 11:50 *A new Great Game in the Western Balkans? Global hegemonic tendencies and regional opportunities*
Daniela Irrera, University of Catania
- 11:50 - 12:00 *Lessons learned from EU-Turkey relations*
Seda Gürkan, Université Libre de Bruxelles
- 12:00-12:10 *European integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Internal challenges and foreign influences*
Sead Turčalo, University of Sarajevo
- 12:10 -12:20 *Diluting principles, darkening EU accession perspective: Politicization of Kosovo's visa liberalisation process*
Gentiola Madhi, Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, Transeuropa
- 12:20-12:30 *EU's approach on the Western Balkans in 2020: It's the front-yard, stupid!*
Klodiana Beshku, University of Tirana
- 12:30 – 13.00 Questions and Remarks

Panel 3: Albania in the Western Balkans and the European Union: Past, Present and Future

Moderator: Klodiana Beshku, University of Tirana

- 15:00-15:10 *The Role of the EU in promoting research in Western Balkans*
Merita Xhumari, University of Tirana
- 15.10 – 15.20 *The role of education in promoting European values in Albania*
Nevila Xhindi, Mediterranean University of Albania
- 15:20 - 15:30 *The European Union and Albania: A Historical Overview*
Simone Paoli, University of Pisa

- 15:30-15:40 *EU, a condemned Union: The critique debate of being part of it in Albania*
Edon Qesari, Mediterranean University of Albania
- 15:40 -15:50 *The EU's transformative power: from Agencification to Rationalization of the Albanian Public Administration*
Nysjola Dhoga, University of Tirana
- 15:50-16:00 *Minority Policies during the Albanian Integration process towards EU*
Marsela Sako, University of Tirana
- 16:00-16.10 *European integration of Albania: The impact of high rates of youth emigration for the country*
Dhurata Milori, University of Tirana
- 16.10-16.20 *The electoral system in Albania: A challenge for political actors in the negotiation process with the EU*
Alketa Marku, Aleksandër Moisiu University of Durrës
- 16:20 – 16.50 Questions and Remarks

Day 2, 12 June 2020

**Discussing Future Collaborations in the Framework of Erasmus+
Projects
e-Roundtable.**

Moderator: Nysjola Dhoga, University of Tirana

- 10.00 – 10.05 Welcoming Remarks
Elona Saraçi, Erasmus+ Office Albania
- 10:05 – 10:15 EU funded projects of the University of Tirana
Elton Skëndaj, University of Tirana
- 10:15-10:25 PoSIG consortium as joint infrastructure of a future Jean Monnet Network
Franz Kok, University of Salzburg
- 10:25-10:35 What students expect from Regional Projects?
Vilma Beqa, PoSIG student
- 10:40-11:30 e-roundtable – Discussing future collaborations in the framework of Erasmus+ projects (Closed session)

*Moderator: Maddalena Comincini – University of Salzburg
Klodiana Beshku – University of Tirana*

Prof. Franz Kok, University of Salzburg
Maja Savić-Bojanić, Sarajevo School of Science and Technology
Aneta Cekikj, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje
Valida Repovac Nikšić, University of Sarajevo
Aleksandar Pavlovic, University of Belgrade
Blerjana Bino, Co-Founder, Center Science and Innovation for Development (SCiDEV)
Dhurata Milori, University of Tirana
Nysjola Dhoga, University of Tirana

11:30 Conference Closure

DAY ONE

June 11th 2020

**THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION OF THE WESTERN
BALKANS: RESILIENCE, FAILURE AND
CHALLENGES**

***PANEL I: Post COVID-19's implications to the European
Integration of the Western Balkans***

Moderator: **Klodiana BESHKU**, University of Tirana

OPENING OF THE CONFERENCE

WELCOMING REMARKS

Gentiana KERA, *Vice-Rector of the University of Tirana*

Dear colleagues and conference participants,

It gives me a great pleasure to make some welcoming remarks on behalf of the Rector to the virtual conference in the framework of the Jean Monnet Module “Resilience and European Integration of the Western Balkans” at the University of Tirana which is organised in cooperation with the Centre “Science and Innovation for Development”.

The conference addresses the Integration of the Western Balkans in European Union, an important process for Albania and the region, including in the discussion the implications caused by Covid-19 pandemics, which has posed important challenges to states and societies.

We all have been experiencing some unusual times.

Last few months have been challenging also for universities to adjust to new working conditions, considering that universities are places of exchange of people, ideas and research. Therefore, I appreciate the initiative of the organizers for bringing together academics, policy makers and representatives of civil society and putting together an engaging conference programme.

I would like to thank Dr. Klodiana Beshku and all the collaborators for their work in organising the virtual conference.

I hope you will enjoy the two days of debate and networking!

REMARKS

HE Luigi SORECA, Ambassador of the Delegation of European Union to Albania

It's my pleasure, on behalf of the European Union Delegation to wish you a great two days conference on a subject which couldn't be more appropriate!

I would like to add a word to the title of your conference. After "Resilience, failures and challenges" I would like to add the word "success", because COVID-19 has not affected the EU integration of the Western Balkans. This is clearly revealed by the way the European Union and its Member States and the countries in the region has showed mutual proximity and solidarity during the crisis.

After a moment in which inevitably the Member States, taken by the outbreak of Covid-19, have looked at their own general health situation, the European Union has reacted very promptly *vis a vis* the Western Balkans and in two phases. An important financial and I would say also political assistance has been allocated for the Western Balkans. On 29th April, the EU mobilised €3.3 billion to the benefit of the Western Balkans, in order to tackle, first, the immediate health sector needs. And then, even more importantly, we are preparing the aftermath of the crisis by supporting the social and economic recovery that will be needed in the next weeks and months. We also see how the European Union has put at disposal of the Western Balkans all its cooperation tools. We have allowed the WB to be part of the joint procurement process that has permitted procuring protective equipment in a faster way. We have also lifted restrictions on exports of protective personal equipment for the WB countries, despite the fact that this was not happening for the rest of the world. And the Member States, which were inevitably looking at their own situation, were in favour of opening the market of European Union towards the WB as another sign of solidarity. This allowed the fast flow of essential goods through the green lines linking the EU and the Western Balkans and, of course, the donation of testing materials and other protective equipment. Here in Albania, the EU Delegation is going to manage 220 million Euro of COVID-19 response, four of which has been already invested on health sector needs. Soon, I will deliver five ambulances, several ventilators and more than a hundred hospital beds to the Ministry of Health, which is the second instalment of our support.

I would like also to remind everyone that this solidarity to Albania goes back to November last year when the state of emergency started with the dramatic earthquake that hit Albania with 51 casualties. Also, in that context, the EU was very immediately showing solidarity I'm sure and you all remember, the extremely successful donor's conference of 17th February that brought 1.1 billion euro of donations and very favourable loans to Albania. Those donations have been already implemented through the EU4Schools programme, which already is leading to many schools being rebuilt in Albania.

During crises, solidarity does not stop. And paradoxically in the middle of these crises, the historical day of 25th March brought the decision of opening accession negotiation. I remember how eight months ago, after the non-decision by the European Council to open accession negotiation, there were very negative headlines, not only in Albania but in the region. It mentioned the loss of leverage by the EU in the Balkans, the end of integration progress and process. I said at the time to the National Council for EU integration that not everything was negative. The non-opening of negotiations in October 2019 indeed launched such a rich debate about EU integration in the region. Then it brought the adoption of the new methodology and the progress made in these countries including Albania, which led to the decision of 25th March. If I can mention my President, President Von der Leyen, in her first few months, she has made regular statements in favour of the EU integration of the Western Balkans, showing the commitment of the EU to deliver despite to the crises.

I also want to mention the EU Zagreb Summit that was a very important milestone, in our view, to endorse the methodology and request from the Commission to propose a broad economic investment plan for the region. This will come in October, but, already now, Albania has been granted 180 million Euros very favourable loans from European Commission for social economic recovery. Once again, in this very difficult moment, the EU integration process has shown with the new Commission, with new commitment, with a new methodology and therefore with a new engagement by the Member States, that the crises have not stopped integration.

What's next? Talking about the aftermath, our financial assistance will help to overcome the crisis that will be important in the region. There will be a loss of employment, there will be a GDP lowering of important amount in the next months. The forecast for next year is more positive. But talking about integration, I think we are living an important moment. Albania for example has to go through a very

important reform process. The Council conclusions of 25th March are the roadmap to follow. What is very important is to find a strong cross-party consensus in the country to make sure that cooperation and I would say compromise becomes the base word of the next months of work in Albania. Last week, we had a positive step forward with the political agreement on electorally reform that shows that when it comes to EU integration and the conditions to be fulfilled in order to move forward, the pressure coming from the 97% of Albanians that wants to join the Union brings parties and stakeholders together. And only two days ago, we had a very important meeting of the National Council of EU integration with all the institutions involved in this process, but also the judiciary institutions, the independent institutions, the civil society, the Member States representatives. They all looked at the Action Plan that the government has put on the table to try to coordinate the whole society effort which is necessary to move forward.

We are in a crisis, which is far from over as the last figures unfortunately show, not only in Albania but also in the neighbouring countries, but the crises has brought the Western Balkans and the EU closer and I would say in both direction. As for example, with Albania helping some of its closer Member States to go through the difficult crisis.

This is why I would like to add the word “success” to the title of today’s conference, because we can see that, in the last six months, EU integration have moved forward. Gone through the crisis, hopefully helped by a new spirit of consensus and compromise, we hope to see the country move towards the start of negotiations as soon as possible with the first Inter-Governmental Conference.

EUROPEAN UNION AND THE WESTERN BALKAN: STATE OF AFFAIRS AFTER THE COVID 19

REMARKS

Mr. Ditmir BUSHATI, *Former Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania*

Thank you for inviting me to analyze some of the topics, which I suppose, are of mutual interest. As figures show, we are not yet at the post COVID situation, but, if I have to analyze the current situation firstly from the EU and then the Western Balkans perspective and also the interactions between them, I am about to say that “the water under the bridge is not going to be the same” after this. We all have to align the reality with our minds. Having seen the debate and the clash between the US and China recently, EU looks a bit squeezed between this rivalry and the positioning of itself as a global power. This is one of the reasons why, the final words of the EU agenda of intent, are, above all: Sovereignty and Strategic Autonomy.

The reaction of the EU *vis-à-vis* the Western Balkans was a prompt one. There have been few excesses in the Western Balkans blaming European Union but I believe these did not prove true. However, we need to evident the fact that the cooperation between the European Union and the Western Balkans has been very good also in the past crisis. We have seen European Union having a common sense and a common understanding with the countries in the Western Balkans more than with the countries of its own family: responding, for instance, to the Refugee Crisis in 2015. Here I would like to point out the case of North Macedonia and Serbia at the time, but also Albania and Montenegro that responded positively and in a courageous manner towards the challenges of that time, which was not the case with few other EU member states.

A positive development is also the positive attitude in the German-French relationship. In the past years, they were seen as the push backers. With the recovery agenda and with the recovery plan that has been presented by both chancellor Merkel and President Macron - whether it is a Hamiltonian moment for the EU or not this remains to be seen - but it is for sure that there is a plan ahead for the European Union on how to emerge stronger after COVID.

Then, we have seen certain initiatives towards the Western Balkan countries which I hope will be implemented in the near future. First, it is the question of the New Methodology, although I have always believed that the Enlargement Process is not lacking methodology and instruments. We have adopted an Enlargement Strategy also in Sofia Summit back in 2018 and sometimes I get the impression that more paper work we do, less substantive we sound. Then there has been the Zagreb Summit as a milestone of the EU Engagement towards Western Balkans, but as someone who have been engaged into this Process since the early days, if I compare the topics of Zagreb Summit 2020 with the topics with Zagreb Summit in 2000, they are more or less the same. The menu of discussion with the Western Balkans is more or less the same. It is all about rule of law, and in twenty years of time, with exception of Croatia, all other countries that are part of the Stabilization Association Process are still in the process of joining European Union. Then we have had the decision of the European Union to start the Accession Negotiations with North Macedonia, which was a clear green light, and also the decision to start Accession Negotiations with Albania based on a catalogue of standards or reforms. I don't want to engage into the internal political bitterness in Albania because there are enough politicians in the country that are counting whether they are fifteen or twenty or four or twenty-five standards or benchmarks to be met, but I will prefer to speak about the catalogue of standards or homework that we have to address or to meet in order to start the Accession Process. We have been expecting also the publication of the Annual Report, but they have been again postponed for a time. I hope this will have chances of President Vučić to cement the authority in Serbia and I hope that our friend in North Macedonia will be boosted. Although there is a season of elections in the Balkans coming up also in Montenegro and next year in Albania and I would not rule out also early elections in Kosovo.

The last thing about European Union and the transatlantic rift we have experienced during this period, especially in Kosovo. I remember I was in office when Prespa Agreement has been negotiated between Greece and North Macedonia and there has been a spirit of unity between US on one hand and key EU member states especially those that form part of Queen Countries, which are part of the European Union plus UK. Now we see that in the so called Brussels dialogue, the appointment of Lajčák and the way how EU is trying to position itself on one hand, and on the other hand the involvement of the Special Envoy of the President Trump, Ambassador Grenell, the EU gets the idea that there is not that much synergy going on in this respect. It is true that this is a European Issue, Kosovo and Serbia are geographically part of the

European Union, but our generation is used to see United States of America as Richard Holbrook once used to say “as a European Power not as another power in Europe”. Now again, we have to align our minds with the new reality. This is not anymore the case and this is going to be a test for the success of the European Union in its own courtyard especially given with the fact that President Von Der Leyen has spelled out the idea of having a geopolitical Commission.

Three very pressing special issues will continue to be there for the Western Balkans and some of these issues are connected with the decision-making of governments in the Region during the Pandemic. First it’s the question of Democracy and Rule of Law, and I must admit having read the French Paper, apart from very good ideas that have been outlined in the document, this Non-Paper was quite absent in terms of state capture, corruption, rule of law. Having seen the document being adapted in Zagreb few weeks ago, there are very few words about rule of law, state capture and corruption, about elected leaders versus unelected oligarchs. And then we have seen also a little engagement from European Commission when it comes to the preparation of this document. You get the impression that there is a disconnection between the methodology that has been presented where rule of law comes first with the document being adopted in Zagreb. I know that there might be an effort to present a more comprehensive strategy in a process together with the annual reports during autumn, but again, I believe, the need for a better connection between the rule of law and economic development should be reflected in all documents and in all actions provided by the European Commission.

The second challenge is about democracy. We are lacking role models in our societies. In the nineties it was easier. There were role models, there were agents of change. Now the faith of people is not anymore as it used to be. People are trying to find shortcuts to European Union, therefore agents of change are missing, and this is being covered with a lack of honourship in the reform process. The Visegrád countries have been frustrated by the process of imitation of standards by EU *acquis* and imitation of lifestyle, what we see in the Balkans and particularly in Albania we see a lack of honourship for the reform process. We see political actors accusing our partners for the failures in the reform process, namely elements related to justice reform. On the other hand, we say also that sometimes this is a reform where we have co-honourship with international partners, but this is just hiding behind the truth and the truth is, in

my humble opinion, that we haven't demonstrated a honourship to this process and this is the reason why the blame game is going on.

The third element is the economic development. If European perspective is not becoming clear and tangible, for citizens not only in Albania but also in other Western Balkan countries, I am afraid we might see a transformation of 'Enlargement Policy' into a 'Containment Policy' and we will continue to live in a transitocracy where we have to address a sort of drama in our own way and at the same time we have to speak about the influence and the penetration of the so called third actors that have been also quite active during this period of time. If China, for instance, in the past was exerting debt diplomacy in our region and in a more vibrant way in Serbia and Montenegro, we have seen during the COVID a mask diplomacy being exerted by China. If we are used to see Turkey playing an active role within the boundaries of Muslim fraternity, we have seen Turkey before COVID and also after COVID going beyond Muslim fraternity boundaries in the region. Not to mention here the role of Russia in the region that we all know, also the position of the GCC countries *vis-à-vis* other actors in the Region, having in mind the fact that Balkans is considered as a pivot for Europe. All these elements should be taken into consideration when we speak about the geopolitical back up of the European Union that, in my humble view, should be one and foremost in the backyard of European Union, which is Western Balkans.

ENLARGEMENT DURING THE PANDEMIC. PROSPECTS FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

Florian BIEBER, *University of Graz*

This presentation is focused on the implications of COVID-19 for Europe and the Western Balkans, in particular the economic implications and the new enlargement methodology for the Western Balkans.

The economic implications of the pandemic are dramatic for the Western Balkans because the economy of these countries is very much depended on the economy of the European Union (especially Albania with the large number of emigrants in the EU, as well as due to tourism). In this regard it will need a long time to recover from the economic crisis. Moreover, there are no clear scale of the economic impacts of the pandemic yet.

In regard to the mutual perception in the EU and Western Balkans, COVID did not change the situation dramatically. Rather, it made certain problems more visible. In the region it is perceived that the EU has been less cohesive and with a lower level of solidarity that has actually been the case. Large scale of misinformation that effects in the people's perception worsens this perception gap.

The EU has been good in putting forward the process of the EU integration despite the pandemics especially for Albania and Northern Macedonia. The same is also for the financial support. However, despite the challenges in the enlargement process remain, with weak support in key EU member states and entrenched regional problems, such as rule of law and democratic backsliding. Enlargement thus continues to be one of the biggest challenges for the EU.

The new methodology offers new tools but it is not yet clear if they are going to be used properly. EU will need to take very seriously the rising authoritarian patterns and respect of the rule of law in Western Balkans, some of which became worse during the pandemic. It should address the problems to the governments of the Western Balkans so the enlargement does not become a formalistic process.

Key words: enlargement, COVID-19 crisis, rule of law, democracy

CONTINUING EU ENLARGEMENT IN THE TIME OF CORONA: GREAT EXPECTATIONS OR THE END OF ILLUSIONS FOR THE WB

Enika ABAZI, *University of Lille*

COVID epidemics by many indicators is a great crisis, so it is natural to argue that the world we are entering will be fundamentally different from what existed before. In Europe, some predicted the end of the EU, the supercharge of nationalism, the undermining of the free trade and free movements, the return to national sovereignty in foreign policy. Yet, on March 25, the Council of the European Union choose to show up by an enlargement move, giving the green light to the opening of the access negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia after a long period of refusals for both countries.

The document will examine both the political, social and normative aspects that influenced the last enlargement move of the EU and how they might affect Albania's membership prospects in the present and in the future.

Key Words: *Enlargement, membership prospect, COVID, Crises*

EUROPEANISATION WITHOUT DEMOCRATIZATION? EXPLORING SUBTLE AND EFFICIENT WAYS TO SAY NO TO EUROPA.

Vedran DŽIHIC, *University of Vienna*

There are obvious differences between the six Western Balkans' countries but in general it can be said that they are facing a process of Europeanization without democratization.

The most basic pillar of the process of Europeanisation is the assumption that both the European Union and national politicians and citizens of candidates for the EU membership aspire to become part of EU and that they are ready to fully and unconditionally embrace the process of Europeanization. And indeed, it is still a majority of Balkan's population that does emphasize the positive aspects of the EU integration and the EU. Despite all oscillations in the EU's enlargement policy the Union proved once again during the COVID-19 pandemic that it remains committed to commitment towards to WB. However, in some countries of the region parts of political elites and the majority of the political set up in the region seem to prioritize Europeanization based on formal commitments and reforms "on the paper" rather than on a full-fledged democratization of their countries. The type of power they exercise internally often resembles authoritarian type of governance, which in itself is not compatible with the EU standards and democratic values inscribed into the core of the Union. This is why a full-fledged democratization and Europeanisation would automatically jeopardize the basic pillars of their national power equilibrium. As a result we see democracy without plurality, without pluralism and without freedom, where incumbent political parties and power structures dominate institutions, implement majoritarianism, rule by and not of law and engage in subtle ways of distributing goods and resources through patronage and clientelistic structures. Using John Keane's term "phantom democracies" we could argue that for some countries in the Western Balkans the term "phantom Europeanisation" would be a fitting description of the current political state of the art.

What are basic features of this type of rule and what makes the process of democratization and Europeanization fake and phantom-like? Firstly, faking democracy through elections or organizing elections without plurality and fair competition creates a democratic façade but substantially ruins democracy. Secondly,

the narrative of indispensability of strong men on the top of the power pyramids in the countries, accompanied by a narrative that no alternatives to their rule exist, creates a high dependency of common electorate on the leader and the party structure. Thirdly, the strong men and their power structures always pretend to be the best crisis manager, even though it is usually the crisis their artificially create only to present themselves as savior. And last but not least strong men engage in seduction of the citizenry by basically blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, between facts and fake news.

Having this substantial new type of anti-democratic and anti-European rule I am afraid that a new methodology for the EU Enlargement will not be able to change the dynamic in the Region. What is needed is rather a substantial reshuffling of the whole EU enlargement politics and policy, which will be able to draw red lines in cases of violations of basic European values and create new incentives for those actors ready to engage in a real Europeanisation and democratization of their countries and of the region. Pro-European and pro-democratic forces are out there, in local engaged initiatives, in the civil society and social and protest movements, in engaged citizens in general.

Key words: *Democratization, Europeanisation, Western Balkans, Phantom Europeanisation*

*Panel II: Geopolitical approach of the European Union to the
Western Balkans*

Moderator: **Enika Abazi**, Peace Research Institute, Paris

THE ROLE OF RUSSIAN FEDERATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: THE EU PERSPECTIVE

*Doris WYDRA, Salzburg Centre of European Union Studies, University of
Salzburg*

It is hardly possible to talk about European maps, populations, borders, and territories without immediately being confronted with the question “Which side are you on?”. This gives rise to a persistent demand for the European Union to take on a more geopolitical role at least in its immediate neighborhood. This perspective has become even more pronounced since Russian assertiveness has increased. Statements of the European Union’s chief diplomat, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, reflect this very well and his approach and prioritization of the EU’s relations with the Western Balkans are a case in point. He stresses that the EU has to actively fight Russian and Chinese interests in the Western Balkans, as these major powers “use their media to pump up the effect of their aid in order to increase their geopolitical role in the world” and engage in an “aggressive politics of generosity”. To counter this, the EU must develop an appetite to power and a willingness “to act not only comment”.

But this geopolitical role for the EU is not an easy to play and might prove to be even disruptive.

Since its foundation the EU has formed a specific understanding of what it means to be “European” and from this understanding Europe also narrates its global role. Europe distances itself from blunt power politics, but relies on institutions, norms, values and markets – it is a liberal power. European foreign policy imaginaries are attached to legalism and a claim that European law stretches to non-European spaces. It is an empire with a civilizing mission and encourages states to “remake themselves in Europe’s own (liberal) image”. This liberal European approach is challenged by the Russian Federation on different levels and we see this particularly also in the countries of the Western Balkans. Putin’s declaration on the “death of liberalism” increasingly seems to fall on fertile ground. A “divide- and conquer” strategy is applied with support for specific groups and a “staging” of support. And while the accession process to the European Union is tedious and often not straight-forward, an image of alternatives is created by other players in the field. Russian support comes without conditionality but asks for allegiance.

Returning to the issue of geopolitics, is Josep Borrel right to demand a more strategic approach to the Western Balkans, engaging in a power game with the Russian Federation? The argument here is that the EU should not give in to the temptation to become a more “normal” geopolitical actor. The economic power of the single market and the “peace project Europe” were possible to develop only by relying on compromise, dialogue, institutions, and legal commitments. Giving up on this liberal model to compete with authoritarian populist regimes for power and influence would in the long run be disruptive for the union, challenge the common basis which unites European sovereign states and thus destabilize Europe in the long run.

Key words: *Russian Federation, Western Balkans, EU, Geopolitics*

A NEW GREAT GAME IN THE WESTERN BALKANS? GLOBAL HEGEMONIC TENDENCIES AND REGIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Daniela IRRERA, *University of Catania*

The presentation aims at discussing the impact and roles of big powers, namely US, Russia, and China, in the Western Balkans (WB), in parallel (and sometimes, in contrast) to the current presence of the European Union (EU).

WB countries have always represented an extremely strategic area for European partners, but also a very troubled one. Since the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and for many years, the region has been a black hole in the heart of Europe affected by civil wars, economic deprivation and political instability, totally dominated by any kind of subversive actors, terrorists, organised crime groups, insurgents and disbanded former military and intelligence officers. Therefore, WB countries have been an important laboratory for testing the EU intervention and its capacity to provide peace, stability and development. Plenty of political and financial resources have been invested, within the enlargement policy and the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), including rule of law and anticorruption programmes, security sector reform (SSR) plans, military, hybrid and civilian missions. Although these efforts in the last decades, the EU remains popular among local citizens, but very far from being the 'only player in town', especially for local political élites and economic stakeholders.

Looking at the current conditions in the region, one can observe that the EU primacy is challenged by too many players to consider, each of them provided with different interests, preferences and objectives (including different ways to approach stakeholders).

The US has historically played a dominant political role in the WB. Firstly, Americans guaranteed stability at the end of Second World War, in agreement with Western European allies, by endorsing the Serbian leadership and tolerating the Yugoslav communist approach, as applied by Tito, during the Cold War.

Secondly, since the early 1990s, and along all phases of the civil wars, the Clinton administration invested more resources in conflict resolution, only delegating the role of crisis manager to the new-born European Union, when the peace agreements were signed, and the major political and territorial settlements already defined.

Although, US has apparently left the region to be tailed and managed by the European counterparts, local political élites continue to consider the US as the real crisis manager and the one which has effectively ended the war. This sense of ‘gratitude’ constitutes the basis of the authoritative role Americans have been permanently playing.

If the US has contributed to solve many problems with their decisive intervention, Russia represents the historical ally, which could never be disregarded. This was not only due to the ideological similarity or to the Cold War ties (which should certainly be taken into account), but rather to the strong relations established with some WB countries, particularly with Serbia. Russia greatly contributed to protect the Serbian leadership within the Balkan ethnic mosaic. This worked in a quite comfortable way under Tito’ guidance, which was informally supported by the US and European countries, but it started to complicate, following Slobodan Milosevic’s attempts to revitalise a dominance, which was already failing.

By contrasting the independence of Kosovo and favouring territorial fragmentation, Russia has demonstrated it will always be actively present in the WB. As the EU has experienced even in other regions, and in other relevant policy fields, i.e, energy and pipelines plan in the Southern Caucasus or Ukraine, the Russian political, ideological (and sometimes, military) role will hardly be limited.

The Chinese presence is relatively more recent, but probably more subtle. It is evident that China is more focused on the strengthening of its economic power and has started since several years to expand in various regions. Tons of investigations, policy briefs and academic works have emphasised the wide and long-term strategy behind the establishment of the Belt and Road Initiative. Investments in several infrastructure projects have already started, together with a loan policy, which is expected to supplement an ampler involvement at all levels. So far, China has been more successful in some countries, more than others, with Serbia being its strongest supporter.

The impact of so many diverse actors is the reflection of the strategic importance the WB region continues to have. At the same time, big powers contribute to make the EU formally the major player, but concretely the least influent. Hegemonic balances here have always changed and shaped during the decades, depending on historical events and territorial settlements. At present, a new kind of hegemony is gradually emerging, grounded on a basis which is essential not political and military, but rather economic and strategic. Although not really interested in

gaining popular legitimacy, some powers - particularly Russia and China – are turning the EU conditionality in a new form of stick and carrot approach, which looks much more appealing to local political élites and economic stakeholders.

When it comes to future regional opportunities, it is not obvious to say that the WB region continues to be one of the most pursued. Plenty of chances are still available and offered in different ways and as a result of various compromises and negotiations. Looking at how some political élites are performing; it looks that WB countries are divided in how such opportunities should be acquired. National interests, rather than regional ones, are the dominating factors. The accession to the EU – and the constraints this requires - is clearly the most compelling choice but also the one, which can guarantee more long-term support.

As in a renovated Great Game, in which multiple big powers engage in a diplomatic confrontation over the control of a strategic territory, WB continue to be an area of strategic interest and currently at the core of a political game, that all players are strongly willing to pursue. The outcomes of the game are still unpredictable but what can be taken for granted is the fact that the EU is a very weak player, having almost completely missed the chance to be the only one.

Key Words: *European Union, Western Balkans, Great Game, Big powers, national interests, strategic interests*

WHAT WENT WRONG? LESSONS LEARNED FROM EU-TURKEY RELATIONS

Seda GURKAN, *Université Libre de Bruxelles*

Turkey's accession process to the EU has been exceptionally long. In 1987, Turkey submitted its formal application for membership to European Communities (EC). Since then, while the EU has enlarged four times to 16 countries, in 2018, the Council decided that Turkey's EU accession negotiations have come to a standstill. Against this backdrop, the aim of the intervention is twofold: First, by giving an overview of the key milestones in Turkey's turbulent relationship with the EU, the intervention sheds light on the factors that contributed to Turkey's distancing from the EU. Second, main lessons learned from EU-Turkey relations are discussed. In this regard, it is argued that while the conditionality policy is key for the reform process in the candidate state, the process of accession is mainly driven by domestic actors and the governing elite, rendering the accession a highly politicized and reversible process.

Key Words: *European Union, Turkey, Accession, Conditionality, domestic actors, reversible process*

DILUTING PRINCIPLES, DARKENING EU ACCESSION PERSPECTIVE: POLITICIZATION OF KOSOVO'S VISA LIBERALIZATION PROCESS

Gentiola MADHI, *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso - Transeuropa*

This presentation seeks to investigate the politicization of EU enlargement in the light of the decoupling between the Commission's technical positioning and member states' stalling behavior. The empirical analysis focuses on the case of visa liberalization for Kosovo. The analysis traces the shifting positions and contrasting tendencies of France, the Netherlands and Germany vis-à-vis the Commission's recommendations on Kosovo's case. France tends to delay enlargement on the grounds of pure domestic political calculations. Justified on the basis of the 'strict and fair' approach, the Netherlands' approach is shaped by citizens' increasing skepticism towards enlargement, Eurosceptic parties' positioning and protection concerns over normative EU values. By contrast, Germany has maintained consistent commitment towards the Balkans, while demanding tough conditions given the domestic questioning of the transformative power of conditionality in the region.

Key Words: *EU Enlargement, Politicization, Kosovo, Visa Liberalization.*

EU'S APPROACH ON THE WESTERN BALKANS IN 2020: IT'S THE FRONT-YARD, STUPID!

Klodiana BESHKU, *University of Tirana*

This presentation aims to shed light into a new perspective of the Western Balkans-European Union relations: The EU's geopolitical approach to the Region. If we could label the Europe-Asian continent as the Heartland, then, we could say that Western Balkans constitutes an important venue from a strategic perspective for it represent the *Rimland* of the continent. Nevertheless, in October 2019, the European Council was not able to take a political decision to open to the Region, but a very technical one, substituting in this case the European Commission and exchanging places with it. By switching to a political perception of the work of the European Commission, the European Council put in doubt the Stabilization Association Process over which the European Integration of the Western Balkans and the Enlargement policies of the EU base themselves. In those circumstances, it became unavoidable to ask for a new methodology in terms of Enlargement – mainly wanted by President Macron - which indeed passed by the Commission with a few amendments to please the Council, in February 2020.

This work takes into account that EU should start to rediscover which of its approaches fits better with the WB. It should be revisited by the EU, especially in the times after COVID-19. It is obvious that this situation does not represent at all any attractive reason for the EU to have a closer interest for the WB. EU should include Western Balkans in its after-COVID-19 restart measures, investments and labor work. To be considered that the Enlargement Policy of the EU is considered as “an investment in the EU's security, economic growth and influence and in its ability to protect its citizens”(Communication 2018), but the uncertainty perceived from the EU could discourage the Balkans after two decades of insecurity, without final EU integration in the air. There could be “Balkan fatigue”, not only ‘Europe fatigue’. This work will try to argue that the Western Balkans are not a Buffer zone of Europe, a periphery or its backyard. According to the Eastern perspective, they are exactly its front yard and as such, the face of EU.

Key Words: *European Union, Western Balkans, geopolitical approach, COVID, Insecurity, Balkan fatigue*

Panel III: Albania in the Western Balkans and the European Union: Past, Present and Future

Moderator: **Klodiana Beshku**, University of Tirana

ROLE OF THE EU IN PROMOTING RESEARCH IN WESTERN BALKANS

Merita (VASO) XHUMARI, *University of Tirana*

In its pathway to EU accession, the Western Balkan countries have become a dynamic policy environment, which make those an interesting case for analysis of institutional reforms. The promotion of science research is important in addressing the knowledge gaps and ensuring the comprehensive evidence for policy design. The aim of this analysis is to reflect on the importance of the EU projects for supporting research and networking of professors of universities in EU with those in Western Balkan.

After 2005 the trend for implementing the Bologna system in higher education was evident in all Western Balkans, as well as introduction of the private universities. These main developments create new challenges, as well as the need for research-based teaching, which is common for almost all EU Universities. Horizon 2020, COST actions, Erasmus+ and direct support for regional research, recently “Universities and the Labor Market in Western Balkans” have shown the need for more efforts from universities in Western Balkans to be involved in research projects. The regional approach is relevant to the light of common tradition in their system of education and common future in the process of EU integration. Despite the enormous inflow of assistance, while some progress has been made in the EU accession process, the foundations for sustained economic development and growth have not been established in the Western Balkans, consequently not much attention and resources have been provided for research. There is a widespread concern that evidence-based policy need more collaboration of universities, labor market and civil society.

Key words: *science research, EU integration, Western Balkans, universities.*

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN PROMOTING EUROPEAN VALUES IN ALBANIA

Nevila XHINDI, *Mediterranean University of Albania*

A civilized society cannot function unless it is supported by three equally important pillars: democracy, economic stability and welfare, and education. Education is one of the keystones to ensure the sustainable and peaceful development in Albanian society related to contemporary citizenship issues, ethical knowledge and core competence. This means first of all, being aware that you have values; then, understanding one's own values, but also the values of others, and therefore, how to handle the value difference.

Values are universal ideas and the principles of guiding the behavior of individuals and communities. Therefore, European values are "those values which will contribute to co-existence of people with different values i.e. different hierarchies of values in the European environment" (Vican, 2016, p.12). The civic dimension of education has now become a priority within the European commission work plan (education and training 2020 new priorities for 2015-2020). Many initiatives are now being taken by EU institutions.

While the Government of Albania is engaged in EU related reforms, there is a lack of comprehensive information and public debate and dialogue about the EU integration, accession process and related reforms, its benefits and costs among key target groups, its real impact on the Albanian society and life of Albanian citizens.

This paper is based on a survey "European dimension in education" with high school students in Albania, about their perception on EU integration, EU values and key institutions. Results from the study are an indication to the state of arts in which Albanian high School students are informed about EU processes and Albania and EU processes. Fostering citizenship education and promoting education on the EU in schools by means of both formal and non-formal methodologies helps improving democratic culture and political literacy at both EU and national level. Schools must become the epicenter of diversity and Europeanism. Adolescence, as the period when a person's identity is defined, is essential in the development of values. Furthermore, the values of young people can also reflect the direction of the change of a culture or the Albanian society.

Key words: *education, values, youth engagement*

THE EUROPEAN UNION AND ALBANIA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Simone PAOLI, *University of Pisa*

This paper deals with the relationship between the European Union and Albania from a historical perspective. It is based on the available literature and primary sources. The paper argues that the EU has been more interested in Albania because of its weaknesses than because of its potentialities, the risks it posed being perceived as greater than the opportunities it offered. Albania, in this context, has always been considered as a small piece of the larger Western Balkan puzzle. The paper also argues that, despite delays, limitations, and contradictions, the EU strategy has seemed to be rather successful. If Albania is today more stable, democratic, and prosperous than thirty or twenty years ago, it is also thanks to the complex combination of financial assistance, political conditionality and, later, prospect of membership developed by Brussels. The current slowdown of the EU enlargement process and more general economic, social, and geopolitical dynamics, however, could easily lead to significant “steps backward”. The paper, finally, argues that Italy has been playing a major role in making Brussels aware of the strategic importance of Albania and of the value of letting it enter the EU. This has been due to Italy’s special relationship with Albania as well as to the willingness to share the burden of its stabilisation.

Key words: *European Union, Albania, Western Balkans, enlargement*

THE EU, A CONDEMNED UNION: THE CRITICAL DEBATE OF BEING PART OF IT IN ALBANIA

Edon QESARI, Mediterranean University of Albania

The primary motive of this study regards some aspects of the image that the EU encounters in the Western Balkans. Specifically, after the spread of COVID-19 the communitarian aspirations – already damaged by the 2008 financial crisis - the union remains locked, or rather trapped, between two master-plans: if Europe should conserve its current framework, which is basically an inter-state embodiment; or it should transform itself in a real, well-balanced community, where national sovereignties are willing to devolve their tasks and privileges to higher authorities.

Besides this very profound and well known dilemma, highlighted by the deplorable incapability with which the European Union is reacting to the Coronavirus crisis, this dire situation is triggering clashes not only amid its Member States - symbolized by a long season of disagreements between Italy and France, on one hand, and Germany and Netherlands, on the other; but also between this concrete European reality – which resembles more and more to a Westphalian soft scenario than to a Maastrichtian heritage - and an idealistic vision of Europe as a standardized democratic mechanism as it is normal in the mainstream political mindset all over the Western Balkans.

We assist today in a total lack of any critical debate, in Albania, about how the EU is tackling the Coronavirus challenge amid its member states. In Albania, there exists a common-shared European aspiration that can be described as a conservative one. It follows, as a matter of fact, an absence of critical inquiry that has its genesis in the first half of the 1990s, when the EU was, on hand, very different from what is today, and on the other Europe, *per sé*, was perceived just like a remedy for what a young liberal-democracy like Albania wasn't able to achieve. During those times, Europe was a solution to ourselves. Worse, it assumed the form of a monolithic and despotic ideological Leviathan, undisputed and used as an electoral *cliché*.

To a factual Europe, where Greece in 2015, and Italy in 2020 represent two paradigmatic failures (and tragic, if we think about the meaning that a founder State like Italy, and a cultural reference like Greece embody) the non-existent critical debate in Albania, still offers the image of an Olympic community. I think that today is very

important that an official candidate state like Albania observes very carefully – and as a consequence, put the roots of a critically-driven public debate about Europe.

Key words: *EU, Albania, debate, image*

THE EU'S TRANSFORMATIVE POWER: FROM AGENCIFICATION TO RATIONALIZATION OF THE ALBANIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Nysjola DHOGA, *University of Tirana*

These presentation tries to analyze the impact of Europeanization on the Albanian polity, more specifically the process of agencification that took part in the country in parallel with the beginning of the process of EU integration. For many scholars agencification means the creation of public bodies that are structurally disaggregated or even formally separated from the central ministry and function in a more business-like condition as the state bureaucracy.

The state modernization in Albania at the beginning of the '90s through liberalization of the economy, privatization of the public enterprises and reorganization of the public administration, as in other eastern European countries, was often undertaken in line with the advices of international specialist or foreign donors that assisted the governments in the reforming process. However, as it resulted in other countries, this foreign expertise wasn't adapted with the existing institutional structure of the country.

One of the main factors of this reforms, or at least for speeding them, has been considered the Europeanization process, but how could the EU contribute to the agencification process when the public administration is not a harmonized field and there is no *acquis communautaire* for setting standards on national public administration? Although the EU stresses more on the results of the reforms than to the institutional structure, there are anyway several regulations and directives that implicitly or explicitly oblige to set up some organizational units and foresee the fundamental characteristic that these units must have to fulfil their functions.

The process of agencification in Albania passed in several stages from the mid '90 when several autonomous bodies similar to the French Public Establishment (Entet Publike) were created, to the creation of semi-autonomous or executive agencies that speeded after the 2000 and finally with the new form of autonomous agency foreseen with the law 90/2012 "On the Organization of the State Administration" which created a new typology of bodies subordinated to the ministries. Anyway, these reforms

created more problems by overlapping functions of these units than creating a more economical, effective and efficient public administration.

Rationalization of the Public Administration through a process of de-agencification is the new trend of the EU approach in the region and in Albania as it is strongly supported by SIGMA, an initiative of the OECD and the European Union. In this framework, in 2017 the Albanian government started the reform of de-agencification by merging agencies in bigger units. This is considered an important part of reforming the public administration as a requirement in the Albanian EU integration process and there is still much to do at regard.

Key words: *EU integration, Public Administration, Agencification, de-agencification, rationalization.*

MINORITY POLICIES DURING THE ALBANIAN INTEGRATION PROCESS TOWARDS EU

Marsela SAKO, *University of Tirana*

The process of Albania's integration into the European Union is closely related, among other things, to the protection and respect of fundamental human rights, an integral part of which undoubtedly remains the protection and respect of minority rights. The EU's founding values include the rule of law and respect for human rights. Since the protection and respect of minority rights is considered one of the main pillars during the EU enlargement process, the improvement of national legislation and policies and at the same time the approximation of this legislation with the criteria and standards required by the European Union remains one of the main challenges of all the countries of the Western Balkans and undoubtedly of Albania as part of it.

In this context, minority policies at the national level, are analyzed as an important element of the European Union's political conditionality towards Albania as part of the Western Balkans. Given this, the presentation aims to analyse how the process of Albania's integration into the EU has influenced the change of the national legislation and policies regarding the protection of national minorities.

In order to analyze this issue will be used official documents, legal initiatives undertaken by Albanian governments over the years, with a special focus to the approval by the Rama's government in 2017 of a national law on the protection of national minorities. Also, will be used statements and attitudes of key representatives of the Albanian government and minority representatives in Albania regarding these legal changes.

Key words: *European integration, minority policies, EU political conditionality, human rights, national law.*

EUROPEAN INTEGRATION OF ALBANIA: THE IMPACT OF HIGH RATES OF YOUTH EMIGRATION FOR THE COUNTRY.

Dhurata MILORI, *University of Tirana*

Albania is at the top of countries in Europe with the high level of young people who want to leave the country with no plan to return. Some of the main social problems in Albania related to the high number of young people who want to emigrate are: poverty, unemployment and uncertainty of a better future. The primary and general objective of this presentation is to evaluate the reasons and impact that the Albanian youth emigration has for the country in the context of European Integration process at the time when the high rates of migration and asylum seekers is a phenomenon which remains at the margins of the debate on enlargement in the European Union. The research for this work is based on qualitative and mainly quantitative methods. A questionnaire was sent and filled electronically by 493 students of the University of Tirana (students of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Faculty of Economy) of the age-group 18-30 years old and for the time period February-June 2020.

Based on literature review, the official statistical data, studies and the results of the questionnaire, the presentation analyses how students perceive the emigration, main reasons to emigrate or re-emigrate, main difficulties as emigrants, and what can bring they back in their country. It is also analyzed the impacts that the Albanian youth emigration has in the economy and how it lows the chances for the country's economy to improve. The presentation is focused in the demographic facts and the long-term impacts of the ageing of the population and brain drain for Albania. At the end are given recommendations on the way the youth should be involved in the labour market, public activities, decision making processes in order to make them stay and not leave the country.

Key words: migration, European integration, youth, students

THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM IN ALBANIA: A CHALLENGE FOR POLITICAL ACTORS IN THE NEGOTIATION PROCESS WITH THE EU

Alketa MARKU, University “Aleksander Moisiu”

The opening of accession negotiations in March 2020 was the result of Albania's reform efforts in recent years and acknowledgement of the EU for the progress achieved.

The first intergovernmental conferences should be convened as soon as possible after the adoption of the negotiating frameworks by the Council. Prior to the first intergovernmental conference, Albania should adopt the electoral reform fully in accordance with OSCE/ODHIR recommendations, ensuring transparent financing of political parties and electoral campaigns, continuing the implementation of the judicial reform, including ensuring the functioning of the Constitutional Court and the High Court, taking into account relevant international expertise including applicable opinions of the Venice Commission and finalizing the establishment of the anti-corruption and organized crime specialized structures. This is the reason why the electoral reform in Albania has received attention, at a time when the parliamentary opposition has left the mandates.

In Albania, during these last three decades, 17 elections have been held and the electoral legislation had changed 12 times. But, the electoral process remains still problematic. The changes that the electoral system in Albania has undergone since the '90s have been followed by debates and disputes by various political actors in the country, which has currently brought the need for a review of the electoral system, as prerequisite by the European Union and as one of the main criteria in the negotiation phase.

This presentation will analyze the approach of the political actors to the process of electoral reform, as well as the effects that the reform will have to the country.

Key words: *Albania, elections, political actors, system, negotiations*

DAY TWO

June 12th 2020

DISCUSSING FUTURE COLLABORATIONS IN THE FRAMEWORK OF ERASMUS+ PROJECTS

Moderator: **Nysjola Dhoga**, University of Tirana

WELCOMING REMARKS

Elona SARAÇI, *Erasmus+ Office Albania*

Dear guests, dear participants,

I would like to greet all of you and wish you all a smooth transition back into a normal life, after this difficult period of quarantine!

On behalf of the Erasmus+ Office in Albania I would like to thank the organizers of this event for the invitation: University of Tirana and especially Ms. Klodiana Beshku, Jean Monnet Module grant-holder. It's my pleasure to greet this round table which will tackle important issues, mainly related to regional cooperation within the framework of Erasmus+ program. A special greeting goes to the distinguished collaborator Prof. Franz Kok, with whom we have worked with for many years and hopefully our cooperation will continue further on.

Regional cooperation is one of the key objectives and aspects of the Erasmus+ program, therefore the main regional event of last year organized by our office, assisted by DG EAC of European Commission and EACEA agency in Brussels, was dedicated to the impact of CBHE projects in the Western Balkan region. Since the discussions will be mostly focused on regional cooperation, I'll take the opportunity to share with you some of the conclusions of the last regional meeting:

- In the WB context, regional cooperation has been traditionally perceived as less attractive than cooperation with EU HEIs. Participants suggested working towards the creation of a WB Higher Education Area, which would facilitate, among other things, mobility of staff and students, or the development of joint degrees.

- According to participants, further efforts should be made concerning project sustainability in order to foster and sustain regional cooperation. Participants pointed out that the implementation of regional initiatives presents significant challenges that render national CBHE projects to become more attractive.

- Joint degree projects constitute a case in point since there is no automatic degree recognition practice in the WB.

Thus, I invite all of you to take into consideration these conclusions as the exchanging ideas or discussions of this round table will be oriented in the same line: fostering the regional cooperation within Erasmus+ program.

The integration of Albania in Europe is the main political aspect nowadays, so you should take the opportunity of being promoters of this process with regard to Higher Education field through building networks in the region and developing the projects which will facilitate it. Our office will assist you whenever needed and will continue to present the opportunities that Erasmus+ program offers both for the HEIs and individuals involved in the HE.

I wish you all a nice meeting, with many useful ideas, results and new partnerships in the region!

EU FUNDED PROJECTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA

REMARKS

**Elton SKENDAJ, Director of International Relations and Erasmus + Office,
University of Tirana**

University of Tirana, as the largest and the oldest public university in the country plays a major role in the social and economic life of Albania. Besides many top objectives to further improve the quality of higher education provided to many students, internationalization remains one of the main goals. In this context, Erasmus + program supported by the European commission remains the main platform for internationalization not only for HEIs in Albania but in Europe and beyond.

The last four years have been difficult for certain issues, with ups and downs, while the Erasmus + program involvement of UT students and staff marked some great developments. The Directorate of International Relations and Erasmus + Office at UT managed to increase the number of international partners of UT with Erasmus + ICM agreements reaching 100. Also, a positive development was the number of capacity building projects and Jean Monnet modules which for the first time were introduced to UT by Dr. Klodiana Beshku back in 2017. The experience helps to build and run better internal procedures.

On the front of student exchanges, UT scored some remarkable progress with more than 450 students doing a mobility in one of the partner universities across the EU. The same applied to academic staff. Also, regarding gender parity, student girls in UT are dominating in Erasmus+ program. Approximately 71% of all students in an Erasmus+ mobility have been girls.

That is a fantastic news and the Erasmus+ students will provide a major role in the social and economic life of the country. That is due to the fact that Erasmus remains a new window to Europe offering some new great academic, cultural, linguistic, and social perspective. Therefore, as the saying goes, “Once Erasmus, Always Erasmus”, the program European Commission provides a major support to Albania.

ATTRACTING WESTERN BALKAN REGION AS WORKPLACE WITH REGIONAL SECTORAL INTEGRATION

INPUT

Franz KOK, *University of Salzburg*

Background: A network of nine Universities providing a joint MA in Political Science – Integration & Governance (PoSIG – see www.posig.info) is training students from Western Balkan to develop know how and solutions for the regional integration towards Europe. Coordinated by University of Salzburg PoSIG includes HEI from Bosnia, North Makedonia, Kosovo, Albania and Slovenia in joint curriculum – partner from Serbia and Montenegro integrated in the upcoming Erasmus Mundus Joint MA Program. The program received European Accreditation in 2017. Associated partner from Black Sea Region, Southern Caucasus, Central Asia, Middle East and Latin America integrated in a network as well as multilateral stakeholder as www.rcc.int, www.cei.int and www.unodc.org and www.osce-academy.net

Small states with small societies and weak economies need regional cooperation to catch up with Europe. With progress in sectoral integration policies at the Western Balkan the attractiveness of the region for young qualified people is increasing and the progress in this integration process needs the qualification of young experts. Only progress in the region keep people optimistic and invites emigrants to come back and bring their experience as human capital for progress in the region.

- Joint Study Programs at HEI & secondary education, training of staff in public administration.
- Labor market liberalization (health sector, IT, education & research, construction and infrastructure)
- Bordercrossing services as Public transport and rail, Wastemanagement, Electricity, Touristic infrastructures, Healthcare, Emergency management, Drug&Crime prevention and investigation, Green energy development, Smart City development

Activities against brain drain have to be set in the region and independent from the internal political cycle and current “weather” in EU institutions.

Political strategies:

- >Search for policy fields with low conflict potential.
- >Sectors with high degree of Europeanization can further go ahead (like HEI).
- >Establish political competition among needs of the young generation.

- >Establish a political culture of change in elite recruitment.
- >Avoid political elites who are interest in regional border culture.
- >Lockdown old ethnic cleavages and traditions cultivated from wartime.

The region needs more bonding initiatives and less border culture.

WHAT DO STUDENTS EXPECT FROM REGIONAL PROJECTS?

Vilma BEQA, *PoSIG student*

As a student, I have always been interested in experiencing a study semester abroad. As a Political Science student, I have been particularly interested in study programs within the framework of Regional Projects. I assume the same applies to many other students from the region, and this due to many reasons.

- Most of the exchange study programs offered are free to attend or do offer scholarships to support the students financially. This attracts the students and helps them to focus on their studies while living in another country.
- Meeting other students and visiting places, gives a boost to the cultural exchange, a goal that is intended from both the universities and participating students.
- Advancing their knowledge on courses/subjects that might not be covered or covered in a limited way in their home universities. For instance, I found courses in research methods more advanced than those that I took in Albania.
- Last but not least, as a student from the Western Balkans, it is expected that Regional Projects to offer mechanisms that would bring the participating students from these countries closer in a substantial way.

Following, I will offer a more comprehensive explanation from the perspectives of a PoSIG student.

PoSIG is a unique master program because it mixes both the European and the Regional experience. Comparing to other Joint degree programs, for instance, to Erasmus Mundus Programs, PoSIG has an added value, since it brings together students from the region and therefore creates the environment for them to share mutual respect and understanding of each-other national identities. For instance, my PoSIG classmates came from Bosnia&Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. It is in the format of this master that the student spends the first year in Salzburg, Austria and the second year they can either choose another country in the Western Balkans or can go back to their home countries. During the first year in Salzburg students attend almost same courses and have to meet regularly, and all the discussions they hold in the framework of class participation, I believe that eventually lead to that mutual recognition previously mentioned. However, I expected to achieve another level of this mutual recognition of each-other national identities that in my opinion, would be possible if more PoSIG students would choose or be facilitated to attend their second year in countries that are not their home countries.

Additionally, the way I see how PoSIG students can benefit from the program is that they can import all the best practices in education and European values, back to

the region. I assume that many students aim this goal since the EU is the family we aspire to join in. Regarding the best practices in education, if there is one thing that I think should be immediately imported from the University of Salzburg, it is their strong interest and approach toward research methods. What I have realized is that integrating advanced research methods in study programs is not helpful only for achieving a better understanding of the subject but also, it helps for critical thinking.

To conclude, I would like to say Regional Projects in general and PoSIG, in particular, is a milestone project through which I have known fascinating young people, which makes me feel optimistic about the future of our region.

E-ROUNDTABLE: DISCUSSING FUTURE COLLABORATIONS IN THE FRAMEWORK OF ERASMUS+ PROJECTS

Closed Session

Moderator: **Maddalena Comincini**, University of Salzburg

Klodiana Beshku, University of Tirana

Participants:

- **Prof. Franz Kok**, University of Salzburg
- **Maja Savić-Bojanić**, Sarajevo School of Science and Technology
- **Aneta Cekikj**, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje
- **Valida Repovac Nikšić**, University of Sarajevo
- **Aleksandar Pavlovic**, University of Belgrade
- **Blerjana Bino**, Co-Founder, Center Science and Innovation for Development (SCiDEV)
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