
International Expert Conference **The Western Balkans in the European Union – Growing Together or Moving Apart? – Challenges, Opportunities, and Perspectives**

Organizers: Protestant Academy Loccum / Southeast Europe Association

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Report by Maxim Kruschwitz, Marburg**

Twenty years ago, the Zagreb Summit was supposed to pave the way for the six Western Balkans states to join the European Union (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia). Closely linked to the prospect of accession was the hope that a crisis-ridden era could be left behind by fostering political and economic reforms. Two decades later, however, the future of the region seems increasingly uncertain.

Opposition against further enlargement has grown among EU member states. This reservation was, for example, expressed by the French President Emmanuel Macron's veto against the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in December 2019. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the situation. Against the backdrop of its effects on the region's economies and political systems, chances are high that the 2020s will be mainly characterized by revanchism, ethno-nationalism, and authoritarian developments. Furthermore, brain-drain and disinformation are considered to weaken perspectives of future prosperity.

The Loccum expert conference has to be seen in the light of these developments. Facing the

challenge of the pandemic, the conference was organized in an innovative hybrid format and gathered experts from think tanks, civil society, national and international institutions, as well as an interested online audience.

While taking into account the various challenges within and among the countries of the region as well as with and inside the European Union, the conference pursued a forward-looking approach and developed ideas to address the increasing alienation between the Western Balkans and the EU. Thereby, together with practitioners and experts coming from the countries of the region and across the EU, the discussion focused on three intertwined challenges: the search for a new European approach towards the region, authoritarian rule, and ongoing ethno-political cleavages.

Democracy – Strengthening Democratic Change

The recent EU strategy for the Western Balkans issued in Spring 2018 states that the countries of the region “show clear elements of state capture, including links with organized crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration, as well as a strong entanglement of public and private interests.” Authori-

tarian control of the states and societies in the region is widespread and has become more severe in recent years – apart from some positive development such as in North Macedonia. Therefore, strengthening potentials for the democratic change in the region is seen as a key objective for the EU.

The participants of the conference discussed different approaches regarding this issue. One option is to shift the focus of cooperation from political elites to civil society actors who are considered an immense resource for social change and provide the necessary sectorial expertise for democratic transformation. In some cases, they play an important role as an oppositional counterweight to the governing parties where governments completely take over the parliamentary work. However, the current representative democracy model undermined by a captured state apparatus does not favor the political action of “system outliers”. The EU should therefore strive to create space and directly support the political and civil society actors.

However, other participants see the civil society actor’s position outside the parliamentary process as a major weakness. They point out that civil society organizations in the Western Balkans are often relatively weak. In particular, the migration patterns of the last two decades which have led to a brain drain in the region and have removed disproportionately the young and educated pockets of the Western Balkans society are seen as a structural reason for the relatively little impact of civil society actors.

Another weakness of civil society that was pointed out during the conference is that only a small number of these organizations really work in cooperation with parliamentary representatives, but most do not and thus face difficulties to assert their concerns politically. In a situation of state capture, the distancing from official political institutions is understandable. However, it could quickly lead civil society organizations into a self-entrapped status of critical but political irrelevant *modus operandi*.

In a parliamentary democracy, the alternative “government in waiting” must be part of the parliament and strive to constructively criticize

the government. Given that, for civil society actors it is crucial to have a substantial say in politics within the Western Balkans states. It is therefore important to pave the way for multiple actors to enter parliament. This should not be a matter of taking over political power, but rather of ensuring everyday parliamentary procedures, such as committees of inquiry. At the same time, it would provide those actors with a more stable foundation for their work, as it would enable them to arrange their funding independently of EU subsidies.

In this way, the accusation of foreign interference could be addressed simultaneously, as political opponents often use the support of external actors as an argument to discredit civil society actors by questioning their autonomy. This approach requires substantial direct budgetary support to pro-democracy and pro-EU forces. It is not feasible for those organizations to provide meaningful and continuous contribution to parliamentary work based on their own resources (the EU and other donors practice only action-support i.e. support for specific actions that are limited in time and scope).

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

Many experts believe that the EU could support these processes much more. So far, they argue,

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

“Togetherness” – Dialogue and Reconciliation

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

According to the participants of the Loccum conference, however, the political willingness of regional elites for reconciliation is still lacking as ongoing ethnic conflicts are too often in their interest, for example by deviating citizens' attention from other political issues. The EU must therefore do far more naming and shaming to build pressure for action on these elites. Specifically, the experts demand that the verdicts of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) should be fully recognized and further legal proceedings should be initiated. However, the EU can only be credible in this regard if the member states internally adopt a unified position on the regional conflicts, especially in view of Kosovo – which is currently not the case since several EU member states refrain from recognizing Kosovo under international law.

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

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

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

Europe – Searching A New EU Approach towards the Western Balkans

Trust in the European approach towards the Western Balkans is in crisis. Emmanuel Macron's veto to the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia in December 2019 was lifted only a few months later, but nevertheless shattered the region's remaining trust in the EU. It simply revealed what many argued for years: the EU's strategy to transform countries of the region into liberal democracies based on market economy and rule of law has not only come to a dead end, but has also contributed to negative trends. Macron's veto, however, gave an opportunity to raise the questions of if and how the Union and its Member States wish to progress with the region in the future. In some participants' view, this resulted in an increased number of member states (mostly in

Central and Eastern Europe, but also Germany and Italy) standing up very clearly and openly in favor of full EU membership for all six Western Balkan states. But in the eyes of many other participants, without halting backsliding in democracy, rule of law and improving the economy in the region, and concrete and visible progress towards narrowing the gap between the region and the EU, this support is unlikely to result in bringing the region closer to the EU.

In order to see positive changes in the region, many participants argued that enlargement policy must be used primarily as a political tool and therefore include much more than merely the methodology. Although the handling of technical issues is considered to be important, these measures would only be effective if they were based on a coherent political strategy. Therefore, a political willingness is required to engage in a debate on the future direction of the EU. Some experts emphasized that this discussion must be conducted not only in political institutions but also in broader parts of the Union's societies. Ultimately, the enlargement would require the consent of the EU's citizens.

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

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

Between Conflict and Cooperation: State and Civil Society in Contemporary Turkey

Report of the Workshop Group “Turkey Abroad: Public Diplomacy Between Rise and Decline”

Organizer: Network Turkey, Mercator Foundation, Blickwechsel Türkei and the University of Hamburg

Online Workshop, 30 / 31 October 2020

Report by László Szerencsés, Graz

Introduction

On 15 July 2016, a medium size group of army officers attempted a coup against the AKP government. The government managed to counter the coup in 20 hours, but 300 people lost their lives in the clashes. Although the details are disputed, it is widely accepted that the Gülen

movement – or elements of it – were involved. In the aftermath of the coup, Turkey has seen an extensive purge against the assets and persons affiliated with the Gülen movement both in Turkey and abroad.¹

¹ Simon P. Watmough / Ahmet E. Öztürk, From “Diaspora by Design” to Transnational Political Exile: The Gülen Movement in Transition, in: Politics, Religion & Ideology, 19 (2018), issue 1, pp. 33–52.