

Conference Report

International Online Conference **Young People, Migration and the Demographic Challenge in the Western Balkans**

Organizers: German Federal Foreign Office / Southeast Europe Association / Aspen Institute Germany

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Introduction¹

The international conference “Young People, Migration and the Demographic Challenge in the Western Balkans” was hosted by the German Federal Foreign Office in cooperation with the Southeast Europe Association and the Aspen Institute Germany. The three-day online event took place from 28 to 30 October 2020 and was part of the official programme of the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the conference was held online in a digital event space that was specifically designed for the purpose of the conference.

The conference aimed to shed light on both the phenomenon of emigration from the Western Balkans and the challenges and opportunities this entails. The discussions offered more insights into reasons why people decide to leave, into the effects the exodus has on the countries of origin and offered recommendations for policy responses to tackle the issue.

The conference brought together scientists, experts and political decision-makers from the Western Balkans, EU Member States, and EU institutions to analyse the situation in the region and to discuss short-term measures and long-term strategies. The overall goal was to identify joint strategies for countries of origin and destination that are mutually beneficial. The issues were also discussed with an eye to the additional burden that the COVID-19 pandemic is placing on the region.

Hosted by Federal Foreign Minister *Heiko Maas* and Minister of State *Michael Roth* in Berlin, the first conference day included Ministers from the Western Balkans, representatives from the European Commission, as well as youth representatives. The conference was held in English, and interpretation was available for the Ministers’ panel.

Throughout the second and third conference day, experts and stakeholders from civil society

¹ This is the full version of the conference report. For the short version of the report, only covering the second and part of the third conference day, see SOM 01/2021. For a comprehensive collection of analyses authored by the speakers of the Conference and some additional workshops tackling the issue of emigration from the region, see Southeast Europe in Focus 1/2021, “Emigration from the Western Balkans”, edited by Hansjörg Brey, Christian Hagemann, Valeska Esch and Viktoria Palm.

and international organisations shed light on both the phenomenon of emigration from the Western Balkans and the challenges and opportunities this entails. Besides the panels, there were short videos providing testimony from young people from the region about their experiences, hopes and expectations.

Opening Speech by German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas

The Opening Speech of the conference was delivered by Federal Foreign Minister *Heiko Maas* on 28 October 2020. He pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic had significantly changed the agenda of the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Following the outbreak, it quickly became clear that Europe would only be able to cope with the crisis in close cooperation with its neighbours. Therefore, the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union laid a special focus on supporting Southeast Europe in this crisis. As Germany regarded the Western Balkans as an integral part of the “European family”, great importance would be attached not only to supporting the region in the fight against the pandemic, but also in the topic of youth migration. But what really turned this conference into a key event of the German Council Presidency would be the active participation of people from the region. Therefore, Maas thanked his colleagues from the Western Balkans and the members of the European Commission and expressed his gratitude to the co-hosts, the Southeast Europe Association and the Aspen Institute Germany.

During the ten days *Maas* had recently spent in quarantine, he had read “Where you come from,” the German Book Prize winner from 2019 by German-Bosnian author Saša Stanišić which he cited to be saying that “our origins are the bitter-sweet coincidences that carried us here or there.” As someone who grew up in the Saarland region which had continuously shifted between France and Germany, this was a stark reminder of how random categories like “home-land” or “nationality” could be, especially if being linked to a place of birth. Maas concluded that the book was showing how migration could change perspectives, connect countries and people, and broaden horizons by creating new

opportunities – despite all the challenges it entailed.

Maas stressed that it was not the goal of the conference to stop migration. 30 years after the fall of the iron curtain it was clear that all those who had tried to do so had failed. Mobility was part of the European Union’s DNA and would prepare young people for a life in a globalised, interconnected world. At the same time, one could not close one’s eyes to the problems that a continuous “brain drain” was causing in the Western Balkans. The numbers were staggering, as *The Economist* forecasts that Albania’s, Bosnia and Herzegovina’s and Serbia’s populations would have dropped by more than a third by 2050 compared to 1990. As recent surveys by the Regional Cooperation Council were showing, 71 percent of young people in the Western Balkan countries were considering moving abroad. In particular better salaries were a strong pull factor. But, as *Maas* underlined, emigration from the Western Balkans was not just about economic opportunities. According to a recent study by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, many young people were also invoking deficits in the education, health or social systems of their countries as well as a lack of merit-based recruitment and corruption. Minorities were facing additional difficulties as many young Roma, for example, were suffering from discrimination.

On one of his trips, *Maas* recounted, he had talked to a young woman in Skopje who told him: “People in this region are fighting about the past, instead of looking to the future. And those who believe in the future are leaving.” And that was exactly what would need to be changed. *Maas* therefore proposed the three following steps: the first was that “we must invest in the future.” Due to the pandemic, more and more companies were planning to “near shore” their production. The Western Balkans were in an ideal position for that. Three weeks ago, the European Commission had presented the new Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans which would focus on the green and digital economy and support connectivity. The nine billion euros it offered could boost economic transformation in the region. But the ba-

sis of successful investment were reforms that only the governments of the Western Balkan countries could undertake by cutting corruption and red tape. The European Commission's recent country reports had shown very clearly that the rule of law and good governance remained top priorities. Not because the European Union required them, but because they were in the interest of the people and businesses in the region. Maas assured the audience that "in all of this, we stand by your side."

At this year's summit of the Berlin Process, hosted by North Macedonia and Bulgaria, the Western Balkans hopefully would launch the next phase of the Regional Economic Area. It would speed up economic growth by bringing the EU's four freedoms to the region. The backbone of regional cooperation, however, were good-neighbourly relations. Making his second point, Maas insisted: "Let us finally put the ghosts of the past to rest! Because they are blocking your countries' way into the future." This was particularly true with regard to Kosovo and Serbia where a settlement of the bilateral conflict was long overdue. On this note, Maas recognised that Miroslav Lajčák had resumed the EU-facilitated dialogue in July 2020 and underlined again that there would be "no alternative to a comprehensive, sustainable and binding agreement." Such a step required strong political leadership.

Maas therefore said to be counting on the leaders in Belgrade and Prishtina to demonstrate leadership by engaging constructively with each other and "thus paving the way into a new era." The sooner they started, the better it would be for the stability of the entire region and the quicker they would unlock Kosovo's and Serbia's EU perspectives. The same was true for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Maas stated. Despite the fact that 2020 marked the 25th anniversary of the Dayton Peace Agreement, to this day, the country remained politically divided along ethnic lines. Maas made clear that "in a country that wants to join the EU, there is simply no place for nationalistic agitation, for the denial of war crimes or the glorification of war criminals." The recent adoption of the Revised National War Crimes Strategy was a very important step in this regard. And it was encouraging that

people in Mostar would be able to participate in local elections for the first time in 12 years.

Maas' third and final point emphasised that it was in the joint strategic interest of both the EU and the region that the Western Balkan countries would join the EU. The EU was where the Western Balkans belonged and where the young people of the region saw their future. "And if the EU does not come to them, they will come to the EU," Maas warned. As an example, he mentioned that in 2001, before joining the Union, 75 percent of young Romanians wanted to leave their country. Today, two thirds of them wanted to stay. Maas hoped to see the same development in the Western Balkans. With the renewed commitment to European enlargement and the necessary reforms at the Zagreb Summit in May 2020, according to Maas, both sides had taken important steps that year to speed up European integration. Germany was planning to hold the First Accession Conference with North Macedonia before the end of the EU Presidency and, if conditions allowed, would be willing to do the same with Albania.

Concluding his speech, Maas reminded the audience of the story of the young woman he had met in Skopje and who had told him that all the young people who believed in a future were leaving for the EU. "What if we showed her that this future is a joint one?" the German Foreign Minister asked, and invited his colleagues in the region to join him in showing that "our destinies are linked, not just by geography, but by choice, that we truly share the same values and that we support open societies, in which all people can thrive – regardless of their gender or their sexual orientation, their ethnic, national or religious backgrounds." In doing so, one "might convince her to build a future in her country," Maas affirmed, thanking everyone for their attendance of the conference.

Ministers' Panel: Emigration, the Demographic Challenge and Policy Responses in the Region and Beyond

The panel was presented by *Michael Roth*, Minister of State for European Affairs at the German Federal Foreign Office. The panellists were *Dubravka Šuica*, Vice-President of the European

Commission for Democracy and Demography, *Olivér Várhelyi*, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, *Gent Cakaj*, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, *Meliza Haradinaj-Stublla*, Foreign Minister of Kosovo, *Srđan Darmanović*, Foreign Minister of Montenegro, *Bujar Osmani*, Foreign Minister of the Republic of North Macedonia, *Josip Brkić*, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina and *Pavle Janković*, Head of Department for Regional Initiatives at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia. Following the Federal Foreign Minister's opening speech, the Western Balkans' Ministers of Foreign Affairs as well as *Dubravka Šuica* and *Olivér Várhelyi* discussed potential policy solutions to the current challenges together with Minister of State *Michael Roth*.

Following his welcome address, moderator *Michael Roth* kicked off the discussion underlining that, instead of the German perspective on youth, migration and demography in the Western Balkans, the focus of the conference was on the perspective of young people from the region. *Roth* thanked the organisers of the conference, the Southeast Europe Association and the Aspen Institute Germany, as well as the think-tank Cross border Factory for their very intensive preparation over the past months. During over thirty meetings in weekly workshops, twelve young women and men from across the Western Balkans discussed challenges in their home countries and across borders, as well as possible policy approaches to tackle these. In this light, *Roth* emphasised, especially these young voices should be the starting point of the discussion with the distinguished panellists and consequently, before starting the discussion a video of six young voices from the region expressing their thoughts on what they expect from their governments for young people to stay in the region was shown.

In the video the young people openly criticized a rampant nepotism, corrupt governments, and a precarious job market in the Western Balkans. To solve the exodus from the Western Balkans (WB), they demanded from their governments a free high-quality education, a public health insurance, an ecologically healthy environment, equal chances through the strengthening of the

rule of law, better salaries and more high-quality jobs. Following the video, *Roth* appreciated the "clear words" of the young people and asked the panellists to comment on what they think of the requests of these young people and on what ideas they have to improve the situation in the region.

The Foreign Ministers (FMs) also appreciated the clear words by the young people and thanked Minister *Roth* and Federal Foreign Minister *Maas* for the very important conference. According to the FMs, youth migration is a global phenomenon but especially important to the Western Balkans because of the worrying trend that many young people prefer to emigrate to Western European countries instead of staying in the region. The FMs recognized the consequences an ongoing exodus of young people would have on the economic and democratic development of the region. All of the FMs agreed that the problem should be tackled jointly in order to strengthen the Western Balkans region as a whole.

Gent Cakaj especially underlined the importance to improve rule of law mechanisms through political reforms and thereby fight corruption and organized crime. He thanked the EU for the recent COVID-19 help packages to the region and emphasised the importance of economic reforms in the region. The WB's comparatively very young population, with some of the youngest populations in Europe, would be an important asset and source of strength. Therefore, it was essential to create all the necessary opportunities for the younger generation to enable them to change the circumstances in their home countries. *Cakaj* also criticised that the recent enlargement fatigue in the EU would not have had a good impact on the region. Therefore, the new measurement for EU association would be a big step towards a further integration into the EU.

Michael Roth reminded the panellists that the young people in the video were mentioning worries about corruption in their countries. The rule of law and the fight against corruption were key aspects for visa liberalisations and for further European integration through the Stabilisation and Association Agreement.

Roth pointed out that the ranking in the Transparency International Corruption Index of the Republic of Kosovo has worsened over the past years. Therefore, he asked if it was not time to reverse this trend and which actions the government in Kosovo plans to take on that.

Meliza Haradinaj-Stubllla stated that young people in the region were an untapped potential and acknowledged that there was still a lot more the governments in the region could do concerning that topic. She criticized that the Kosovar youth would still be afraid of crossing the border to Serbia because they would possibly get arrested. Therefore, the Foreign Minister emphasized the need to work together on building a future for the youth in the WBs. They had the same hopes and aspirations and were confronted with the same challenges and needs. Consequently, Haradinaj-Stubllla appealed to her colleagues, the WB peoples should treat each other as equal and with mutual respect in order to succeed facing the demographic challenge. Furthermore, she expressed her disappointment about the fact that Kosovo was the only country without the right to free travel to the EU. As a consequence, Kosovars would feel less equal than other WB countries, especially considering the fact that EU requirements were met for the past eight years. Haradinaj-Stubllla concluded that visa liberalisation would not only enable free travel, but also mutual exchange and development which would be a requirement to build a future together.

Michael Roth agreed and assured that visa liberalisation was an issue the EU would also be fighting for. Asking the Foreign Minister of Montenegro how it felt to be the frontrunner in the WB considering EU integration, Roth pointed out the decisive phase Montenegro was in. *Srdan Darmanović* emphasized that, regardless of the fact that Montenegro had one of the lowest youth emigration rates in the WBs, it would be a regional problem concerning all WB countries. Darmanović recognized the need of young people for security and stability in order to stay in the region. Therefore, the WBs should work on increasing job-specific skills and working conditions in the region to involve and empower

young people. Darmanović highlighted the important work on intercultural education that the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) would be doing to establish stronger ties between the young people in the Western Balkans. *Bujar Osmani* also agreed on the importance of the topic and laid emphasis on the essentials: to engage, empower and enable young people. Therefore, Osmani explained, the awareness of young people that they were critical for the future of the region should be raised through a process of active listening to their needs. To give the youth a sense of empowerment at home instead of somewhere else, it was necessary to create regional educational and professional opportunities. By including young people in policy making, they would be enabled to directly participate in future developments. According to Osmani, the EU integration promise has been and would continue to be a driving factor of transformation in the region.

Josip Brkić highlighted the incriminatory effect the EU's closed border policy would have on Bosnia and Herzegovina considering the immigration of refugees, who would have to live under miserable conditions. Simultaneously, Brkić continued, Bosnia and Herzegovina was the hardest hit country in the WB concerning youth emigration due to the fact that the country's youth saw few opportunities at home. Especially young education and healthcare workers, but also engineers would leave the country in massive numbers. The student exchange program Erasmus plus would be good for the country since young people who studied abroad would mostly stay in their host country in case they find a job. Therefore, intra-regional and future-oriented measures, such as the mutual recognition of higher education, the development of a regional economic area and free movement in the Western Balkans would be necessary. Considering inter-regional relations between the WB and the EU, Brkić appealed to engage in re-migration efforts in order to strengthen the market of healthcare and other workers that the EU would currently tap into.

Pavle Janković subscribed to the notion that youth emigration would be a burning topic that all WB countries were facing. He regarded uncertainties concerning the new integration

within the region and a lack of employment opportunities as main reasons for the brain drain. After mentioning the importance of projects like RYCO and other initiatives that were under way in Serbia to tackle the problem, Janković emphasised the commitment in the region towards joint action between the WB and the EU.

Dubravka Šuica asserted that the topic of demography was a burning issue for the EU because it affects all parties. She assured that the challenges revealed by the reports of the online preparatory workshops before the conference, such as depopulation, ageing and intergenerational solidarity, would be addressed in the EU strategy in 2021 which aimed to achieve fair access to education and more democratic participation of young people. The EU's nine billion Euro economic plan for the WB would be a deep commitment to provide help. According to *Šuica*, the WB belongs to the European Union, and she assured that the EU would be the WB's friend and partner and that the future of the countries lies in the EU.

Olivér Várhelyi subscribed to the deep commitment of the EU by pointing out the goals of the recently adopted Economic and Investment plan: the first goal was to support the creation of jobs primarily through facilitating access to finance for the small and medium-sized enterprises and young entrepreneurs. The second goal of the plan was to increase the employability of young people in the WB by contributing to their skill sets. And lastly, the plan aimed to support young people to participate in decision-making and regional cooperation. The European Investment package was mainly structured on connectivity to stimulate the economic development and governance of the region. Besides investments in transport, energy, environment, digitalization, and the private sector, helping the youth would also be a major concern to the plan.

Várhelyi claimed that the plan entailed privileged trade relations with the EU and promoted regional economic integration, which would increase economic growth in the region by seven percent. According to Várhelyi, skill mismatch represented a big challenge to the region. Therefore, the EU tried to help young people to

acquire skills needed in the economy. This would include the development of a new and digital economy in the region. Várhelyi explained that a youth guarantee scheme that would be launched in 2021 would provide everybody under 29 years of age within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving the former education with good quality offers of employment or continued education in the form of apprenticeships or traineeships.

After the discussion, the young people from the region were included and posed questions to the ministers. The young people expressed their disappointment over the lack of concrete ideas by the ministers and asked what lessons were learned from the past to adopt measures to increase re-migration and if there were any possibilities besides reforming the rule of law, which would target the problem more urgently. *Dubravka Šuica* reaffirmed that the EU was laying a foundation for young people to stay in or come back to their home countries by investing heavily in the region and providing young emigrants within the EU with professional training they could bring back to their countries of origin. *Olivér Várhelyi* addressed the brain drain by explaining, that there was no "silver bullet" to solve the problem quickly. Instead, it would take at least ten years to bring actual change by implementing the necessary steps, such as: enabling conditions in the economy that provide economic growth, creating an investor's climate to create interesting jobs for the youth in the region and providing the youth with the skills necessary to take these jobs.

Gent Cakaj insisted that the development of rule of law indeed contributed to youth re-migration and elaborated the experiences Albania would have made in recent years with measures fighting organized crime and corruption at the highest levels of government. Paired with economic growth, these improvements in the rule of law would have significantly decreased the number of young Albanians wanting to leave the country over the course of the past years. *Meliza Haradinaj-Stublla* took up the idea of a youth advisory body addressing demographic challenges and proposed to link it to the Kosovar government's effort to establish a regional start-up hub in Prizren. She imagined

that Prizren could be developed to a sort of Silicon Valley of the Western Balkans and invited all the other governments to participate in the project and create a regional platform for the initiative. *Srdan Darmanović* stated that a start-up hub or other things of comparative advantage to other regions and countries indeed would be a reason for young people to stay in their home countries. He gave the example of the Southeast European International Institute for Sustainable Technology as an opportunity for young people to become successful in their own countries.

Bujar Osmani remembered that migration and brain-drain were an inevitable phenomenon in a globalized world. The overarching goal therefore should be to transform migration into brain circulation rather than trying to stop it. According to Osmani, the psychological frame was such, that in the WBs people would always compare the perspectives in the region to the perspectives they could have in the EU. Therefore, Osmani concluded, there was no better platform to try solve that problem than a combination of the European Perspective and an integration of the region into a common regional market with over 18 million people. *Josip Brkić* recalled the promise given in Thessaloniki in 2003 to integrate the WB countries into the EU once they would meet the criteria. Only a couple of countries have succeeded in doing so and Brkić would never be tired from pushing Bosnia and Herzegovina towards the EU.

Pavle Janković summed up that over the past nine years, the WBs had been working on a closer cooperation within the region. According to Janković the 1990s had destroyed trust in the WBs and now they would be creating trust in the region to engage and work together towards a common regional market. It would be a long way towards free travel in the region without prejudices and feelings of anger, but it would be something they would need to work on. Janković asked to speed up the opening of chapters and the engagement with other countries in the region without prejudices.

Opening Panel: Young People in the Western Balkans – “Should I stay or should I go?”

The opening panel was presented by *Adelheid Wölfl*, Southeast Europe Correspondent, Der Standard, Sarajevo. The political representatives in the panel were *Michael Roth*, Minister of State, Federal Foreign Office, Federal Republic of Germany, *Dubravka Šuica*, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography and *Nikola Dimitrov*, Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration, North Macedonia. The young representatives from the Western Balkans were *Marjola Memaj* (28), Co-founder and former Regional Representative at Western Balkans Alumni Association; working as a Communication and Policy support with EuroFIR AISBL in Brussels, *Samir Beharić* (29), Board Member of the Western Balkans Alumni Association and a recent graduate of University of Vienna and Leipzig University, *Egzona Bokshi* (26), engaged in the project “Empowering Youth for a Peaceful, Prosperous and Sustainable Future in Kosovo” funded by the UN Secretary-General’s Peacebuilding Fund, *Nina Dragulić* (27), currently working as a telecommunication engineer; graduated from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering in Podgorica and founded the NGO Montenegro Robotics, *Tomica Stojanović* (27), graduated from the University of Economics, Skopje; worked for Peace Corps North Macedonia and at the youth organization MladiInfo International and *Nenad Jevtović* (28), Director of the Institute for Development and Innovation, member of the Coordination Body for Monitoring Flows of Economic Migration at the Serbian Ministry of Labor.

Chairwoman *Adelheid Wölfl* together with the panellists discussed young people’s reasons to leave or stay in the region. First, the six young representatives each presented their views on the most important aspects in tackling the problem of mass emigration and asked the three present representatives of the EU, Germany and North Macedonia questions regarding these aspects. *Marjola Memaj* was the first young representative to share insights into what she considered important in addressing the problem of mass emigration. She emphasised the lack of democratic culture in the Western Balkan countries. Responsible citizens with democratic values were needed to create

the circumstances necessary to prevent the mass emigration of young people. A way to go about the absence of a democratic culture and the resulting structural weakness of democratic institutions in the Western Balkans was civic education. In order to build a society of democratic, responsible citizens it was necessary to educate people in the values of democracy and the role of citizens at civil society centres in each of the Western Balkan countries. These civil society centres needed to be independent from politics and political parties and had to focus on educating people about their rights and opportunities in shaping their societies as responsible citizens.

Finally, *Memaj* asked *Dubravka Šućica* if the EU would be willing to support building six educational civic society centres in the Western Balkan countries. *Šućica* fully agreed that there was a need for educating the citizens of the Western Balkans at centres for civic education and affirmed that democracy could only live off action and participation at all levels of society. Democracy was only able to succeed in a society that developed a democratic mentality by living and practicing democratic values in all aspects of life. The “Western Balkans Youth Lab” was an example of successful civic education in the region and initiatives like this were important to foster a democratic outlook.

Nenad Jevtović acknowledged that remittance payments – the money transferred back home by emigrants – were very important for the economies of the Western Balkan countries. This foreign income was significantly improving the recipients’ quality of life in the region. But, as *Jevtović* emphasised, remittances could not be regarded as a generator of future development and growth because the investment rate of remittances was very low. Asking *Nikola Dimitrov*, *Jevtović* wanted to know how remittances were currently used and how their investment rate could be increased.

Nikola Dimitrov recognised that remittances were helping the Western Balkans’ economies in the short term. But in order to build up a sustainable economic growth model, investments were needed and directing remittances towards more investment rather than consump-

tion would be a necessary step towards that goal. Investments were necessary to reduce the push-factors behind emigration, such as high unemployment rates, low salaries, and the lack of a perspective of a prosperous life for young people. EU funds were already directed at strengthening education and environmental protection in the region. But remittances would also have to target investments in the region. There were cases of emigrants who came back and invested in their home countries by for example establishing companies. But these cases were very rare, indicating a lack of trust in the system and the rule of law in the emigrants’ home countries. To find out where to start addressing the problem of low investments it was necessary to ask people who had already tried to invest in the region but had failed to do so successfully, *Dimitrov* said.

A very pressing issue for the region, according to *Samir Beharić*, was the mobility across the region. Especially student mobility in the Western Balkans was underdeveloped due to lacking mutual acceptance of degrees or visa restrictions. Considering financial and institutional help, the Western Balkans could not compete with the countries in the EU. Therefore, academics often depended on European student mobility programs, such as Erasmus plus. Mobility within the region, especially considering visa restrictions on travels to Kosovo would need to be improved. *Beharić* recommended to liberalise visa restrictions across the Western Balkans and to establish a student mobility programme similar to the Erasmus programme within the region in order to tackle the problem of emigration of academics to the EU, which led to severe brain drain.

Beharić doubted the chances for a liberalisation of intra-regional mobility without the financial and technical support of the EU and therefore asked State Minister *Michael Roth* if the German government would encourage the European Commission to provide such support especially for students. *Michael Roth* praised Erasmus plus to be a success story both for the Western Balkans and for the EU and announced that the EU would soon invest 50 percent more funds in the Erasmus plus programme. But, as *Roth* pointed out, a vivid democracy needed

committed democrats. The EU was not only an economic union, but also a union of values. These values had to be created in the Western Balkans through interconnectivity, mobility, and especially regional reconciliation, which was one of the most important goals of the Berlin Process. EU visa liberalisation for Kosovo was on the way, especially since Kosovo had met all the required criteria.

Egzona Bokshi reminded the panellists that Kosovo held two European records – it had the youngest population in Europe and the highest unemployment rate among young people. According to her, one in two young Kosovars would want to leave the country for Europe. Especially in times of a pandemic, global warming, and mass migration the national approach to problems did not work and it was necessary to go beyond national politics to tackle these issues. Young people from the Western Balkans shared the same values as the ones in the EU and would want to see their societies develop along these lines. Therefore, young people should have a seat on the table in discussions on European integration. After all, Europe would not be complete without the Western Balkans and an intra-regional integration project without the EU would not be complete either.

Nina Drakulić raised the issue of fostering the engineering industry and developing the digitalisation of the region. Digitalisation would help solve many problems, such as raising awareness of the need to improve air quality in the region, considering that pollution was one of the main reasons for premature deaths. The Western Balkans were in dire need of technological advancement in order to be part of recent technological developments that could help tackle the pressing issues that made young people emigrate. *Nikola Dimitrov* agreed with Drakulić and added that digitalisation would also help fight corruption and would make public administration more efficient and accessible – thus, digitalisation was a major driver of regional development. Dimitrov accentuated that the EU was currently pursuing the development of broadband infrastructure in the region. European funds were ready but it was the actors in the region that did not possess

the organisational capacity for the development of digitalisation.

Tomica Stojanović criticised a growing EU scepticism in the region and especially in North Macedonia. The country had just resolved its name issue with Greece, which had been very difficult, but provided a sense of hope towards accession inside the country. Therefore, the French objection to the accession was very surprising and together with new obstacles to the accession coming from its eastern neighbour Bulgaria, the frustration within the country would be very high. Consequently, Stojanović wanted to know from *Michael Roth* if Germany as the current chair of the European Council, would stand strong on the side of North Macedonia. Roth replied that he fully understood the impatience and concerns towards accession. The changed methodology of the enlargement process would, according to Roth, bring the Western Balkan countries in a delicate situation. With respect to the rule of law, expectations of the Western Balkans were as high as towards member states of the EU. Roth stressed that it was the rule of law, the fight against corruption and the regional reconciliation that would be the main topics right now. Therefore, political leadership especially within the region was necessary to overcome the mentioned disputes, nobody outside the region understood the complexity of the problems between the countries as well as the actors within the region.

It was also necessary to strengthen the visibility of the EU in the region by being vocal and visible not only with money but with clear support concerning the pandemic, the climate and digitalisation right now, *Roth* said. Political vacuums in the Western Balkans would quickly be filled by other actors. But Turkey, Russia and China were not interested in strengthening values like democracy and the rule of law. Roth agreed that the EU was “exhausting and challenging” especially because of its focus on topics like these, but accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia were still under way. The EU was currently confronted with many problems and crises, but the EU should not allow that the people of the Western Balkans would have to pay the bill for these problems. The EU needed to be strengthened and

simultaneously do its best to strengthen the accession perspective of the Western Balkan states. Minister of State Michael Roth concluded the discussion with the statement that the Western Balkans were not the EU's backyard but its courtyard.

Panel I: Leaving the Region – Facts, Trends and Challenges

Ambassador *Susanne Schütz*, Director for South-Eastern Europe, Turkey, EFTA States, OSCE and the Council of Europe in the Federal Foreign Office, Berlin presented the panelists and the discussion. The panelists were *Miran Lavrić*, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Maribor, *Peter Van der Auweraert*, Chief of Mission, Regional Coordinator for the Western Balkans, International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Sarajevo, *Danica Šantić*, Associate Professor, Faculty of Geography, University of Belgrade, *Francine Pickup*, Resident Representative, UNDP Serbia, Belgrade and *Tomica Stojanović*, Graduate from the University of Economics, Skopje.

Prior to the discussion, a short video clip by German English-language broadcaster Deutsche Welle was shown, introducing the topic. The 5-minute documentary presented a handful of young people from the Balkans, expressing the motives behind their departures for a new life in the EU. To the tune of a local pop song about emigration, the youngsters shed light on the desperation they were feeling in their respective hometowns. "Nevena has two diplomas, but nothing to do – no job for her. With her passport, [and a] one-way ticket she is going away – is it forever?", the singer was humming in the background as the interviewees explained how they were hoping to make more of their lives by leaving their country. Their statements featured objectives as diverse as gaining better qualifications, being able to work in the profession they were trained in or freeing themselves from a corrupted system that simply had failed them in their view. The compiled remarks set the tone for the subsequent expert discussion and, as it turned out, gave a fairly crisp idea of the driving forces behind Western Balkan (WB) youth migration into the EU.

Miran Lavrić presented his core findings about WB youth migration in the shape of statistical

figures he had recently collected and analysed. According to this study, the main reasons for emigration were the higher living standards in the EU as well as frustration with the level of corruption, lack of meritocracy and disregard for human rights in their home countries. Caught between these simultaneous pull- and push-factors, the survey respondents moreover said to be experiencing a "lack of vision for their country" that could possibly have lifted their spirits and given them the strength to build a future back home rather than abroad. What is more, unlike inside the EU where many young migrants plan to move abroad for around five years before returning to their place of origin, youngsters from the Balkans for the most part intend to move for a minimum of 20 years, if not forever, *Lavrić* elaborated. Generally speaking, a kind of circular migration between the Western Balkans and the EU was, alas, nothing but a myth, *Lavrić* had found. On a more positive note, however, the findings indicated that the closer to the EU and the more developed a country was, the more likely the young emigrants were to return. *Lavrić* therefore concluded that the Europeanisation of the Western Balkans was a good and effective step forward and should be advanced as much as possible. In response, Ambassador *Schütz* affirmed the importance of the Western Balkans' European integration in the long term.

Peter Van der Auweraert's impressions from the field matched the results of *Lavrić's* research. However, in his experience, migration from the Western Balkans was not just about deprived young people but also about middle-class parents even, who often had a car, a house and a good job, but who were worried for the future of their children and therefore decided to leave. In doing so, they willingly stepped back economically themselves so that their children would have better life chances. The focal point of migration hence remained the Balkan youth but this phenomenon added another layer of complexity to it in which migration was conceived as a sort of investment by well-to-do families. In *Van der Auweraert's* view, this was largely due to a high level of insecurity in obtaining jobs in the private sector, as a lot of job offers went by party affiliation, required an informal 'fee', or risked being unstable to the ex-

tent that the salary might simply not be paid out or the respective company might easily go bankrupt altogether.

Van der Auweraert therefore spoke of an evident dilemma: in order for change to happen, it was essential that the youth became politically active and did not leave politics to the old elites. In fact, by now there were even gaps in the Bosnian labour market that could not be filled. However, at the same time, he admitted that if he were to be a Bosnian parent himself, his advice to his children would be just as much the same: "Go to Germany, if you can." His statement thus revealed a collective action problem among the Balkan youth that called for further research into the matter and that definitely would have to be addressed for a solution to be found.

Danica Šantić presented a recent study of hers in which she had investigated migration from and inside Serbia in the present day and with regard to the future. On this basis, Šantić argued that there was a very high "migration potential" in Serbia of which only nine percent were directed at Belgrade whereas the rest was toying with the idea of moving abroad since they were seeking "crucial change". These people were not migrating for the sake of migration itself but purely to reach a higher living standard. This trend increasingly involved entire families and not only the young. However, along the same line, Šantić also gave a sign of hope, arguing that, in turn, most people would stay if the economic situation was to improve and there were better educational possibilities for their children. In the direction of policy-makers, she therefore recommended to focus on increasing young people's employability and their skills to match with the demands of the local economy as well as to facilitate returns back to Serbia.

In a similar vein, *Francine Pickup* called for a lot more research to be done on returnees to the Western Balkans, as she confirmed the insufficient availability of data, which also *Van der Auweraert* had mentioned. In doing so, *Pickup* emphasised that this should not only happen at the level of quantitative surveys and statistical data collection of migration trends, but

should also enquire into the motivations, ideas and ways of reasoning of the young migrants in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of how they arrived at their decision to move abroad and under what conditions they might return: "We must look at what is *in* the heads, not just at the number of heads." This, she alarmed the audience, was of paramount importance as current UNDP data was showing that the Serbian population was to decrease by 30 percent over the next 30 years if outward migration was not brought to a halt.

This trend not only posed demographic challenges but was a serious development issue, as it resulted in a shrinking workforce, a shrinking tax base, and a devastation of rural areas. Finally, *Pickup*, who is an anthropologist by training, contradicted Šantić in saying that the reasons were not only economic but that there was also a cultural aspect to it in the sense that young people were perceived as successful if they left the country – and as the complete opposite if they returned. Therefore, waiting for economic improvement was not enough but a new narrative around migration and social development had to be created.

Last but not least, *Tomica Stojanović* contributed the perspective of a young person from the Balkans to the discussion, saying that, today, for him and his peers, their outlook on the future was very clear and dichotomous: there were virtually no career prospects in the Western Balkans whereas there seemed to be plenty in Western Europe. Those who migrated simply could not imagine a happy life in their home region, and the economic aspect was definitely the main reason for that. But also, the general quality of life played a role with factors such as poor health care, a poor education system, pollution and limited freedom of religion as well as social discrimination relating to sexual orientation and the like. Above all, the Western Balkans needed more investments, but it remained questionable if that in itself was enough to remedy the causes of youth migration as a whole.

During the discussion, the audience was particularly interested in what the WB states were doing to combat corruption, what to do about

the lack of data, whether emigration led to an increase in nationalism in the region, and what the EU could do to hold the WB elites more accountable. One participant also raised the conundrum of why people from the WB trusted foreign health care systems more than the system they were managing themselves.

In response, *Lavrić* explained that those citizens who were most critical of the respective regime were the most likely to leave, diminishing the ratio of political opposition and definitely heightening the general level of nationalism. According to *Šantić*, the general attitude among critical citizens was that if they could not change the regime, at least they could change their lives. As a result, there was little political interest among the elites to attract migrants back home and returnees were often unwelcome.

This problem went hand in hand with the lack of data that in particular *Pickup* emphasised, calling it a key issue that demanded a lot more attention. As a first step, UNDP for example was pairing up with LinkedIn and Google Trends to generate some sort of big data that would allow to obtain a clearer picture of the structure of outward migration. As a result, UNDP had found for instance that especially doctors and engineers were leaving for Germany. With such information, local governments could then more specifically focus on creating the respective jobs back home and thereby attract returnees as well as foreign migrants.

Van der Auweraert meanwhile put a strong emphasis on the lack of good governance, which was the source of most ills across the provision of public services. For him, the problem remained “hardcore political”. As a consequence, the EU’s efforts should be directed at supporting political change and making young people becoming part of that. Without such a fundamental transformation, he was very pessimistic about any returns to take place – policy programmes which specifically focused on returns were but a drop in the ocean.

Pickup added that such a transformation should furthermore entail investments particularly in small town infrastructure to support the ageing

population and young couples who wanted to have children. That was because next to emigration, countries like Serbia were also seeing a steep fall in birth rates. Overall, it became clear that today’s challenges of the Western Balkans were a continuation of those of the 2000s: democratisation and economic transition.

Panel II: The Effects of Emigration on the Countries of Origin

The panel was presented by *Tim Judah*, Balkan Correspondent, The Economist, London. The panellists were *Mihail Arandarenko*, Professor, Faculty of Economics, University of Belgrade, *Anita Richter*, Senior Policy Analyst & Project Leader South East Europe Regional Programme, OECD, Paris, *Edo Omić*, Directorate for European Cooperation & Strategy, Council of Europe Development Bank, Paris and *Andrea Mićanović*, Youth Representative of Montenegro in the Governing Board of RYCO, Podgorica.

Migration not only impacts the countries people move to but also those they leave behind. As the first panel of the second conference day had already indicated, across the Balkans, the depopulation of rural regions, brain drain, and a rise in nationalism are just some of the widespread consequences of outward youth migration. After the preceding discussion had focused on how the Balkan countries caused their young people to emigrate, the second panel therefore zoomed in on how they were affected by this very emigration. The panel’s overall conclusion was that, essentially, the Balkans had become tangled up in a vicious circle in which the main effect of emigration was the worsening of its causes: economically, socially and politically. In his introductory remarks, *Tim Judah* picked up on a conclusion from the previous panel debate that youth emigration existed in parallel with other demographic challenges to the region, namely a dropping fertility rate and rising labour shortage. Taken together, these changes in the Balkan population were putting their economies in existential jeopardy.

Speaking of dangers to the economy, *Mihail Arandarenko* focused his contribution on the topic of remittances and the public sector. With regard to the latter, he described the Balkan

political economy as a system of “loyalty or exit”: either you were loyal to those in power and thereby received one of the few jobs in the public sector or, if this failed, you left the country and tried your luck in the private sector abroad. In any case, the domestic private sector, which ideally should provide the lion share of employment opportunities to citizens, was never considered a worthwhile option as it lagged far behind the West and jobs in the public sector on the whole were both more stable and better paid.

Apart from opportunities, it was also the currency exchange rate that made even low-paid jobs abroad more profitable than local job offers. As a result, domestic economies were substantially living off foreign remittances. These were often viewed in a positive light and regarded as some kind of informal development aid. However, their negative side effect was to distort the market back home and ultimately causing a vicious circle of migration, remittances, and inequality.

Continuing the unfortunate theme of vicious circles, *Anita Richter* reflected on the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic on the Balkan economies and their outward migration flows. In her assessment, these flows had dramatically dropped due to the pandemic. The global economic landscape after the pandemic was likely to look considerably worse and would determine what migratory movements we would face. In the Western Balkans, the gross domestic product had been dropping massively over the past months, leading to higher unemployment rates, which were already 2 percent higher than in 2019. In particular youth unemployment had skyrocketed. Considering that the Western Balkan economies were hit significantly harder than those of the OECD, a post-pandemic rise in migration pressure towards Western Europe had to be expected.

Building upon these two analyses of the current situation, *Edo Omić* explored ideas on what could be done in the future to improve things. More specifically, he asked the question of how the transfer of funds to the region, both in the shape of remittances and funds from international bodies such as EU grants, could be made more sustainable. For the time being, they nev-

er achieved long-term effects. Moreover, they could stop at any point, as we were witnessing right now as a result of the pandemic. His plea was to invest more broadly in the professional skills and training of the Balkan population.

Of course, he said, he was aware that thanks to such skills many would then especially emigrate and look for jobs abroad in which they could use them. But it was a fact, he stressed, that a certain part of the population would always stay and work in local jobs that were at a high risk of automation. In total, this concerned about 60 percent of the Western Balkan workforce. Hence, to prevent even more unemployment, these employees had to be prepared for the future. As a positive example, he mentioned that today's EU transfers to the Western Balkans were therefore directed at educational investment in order to reduce the persisting problem of skills mismatch in the region. Citing social research, Omić argued that the more education people would receive, the more inequalities (also between genders) could be reduced. But as things stood, the Balkan economies still heavily relied on agriculture, and female employment was very low.

Sharing personal insights from her work as a youth representative in Montenegro, *Andrea Mićanović* pointed out that she herself was facing the same dilemma as everyone else of her age in the Western Balkans: should she stay, or should she leave? This dilemma particularly presented itself to the educated youth who found themselves in a catch-22: they had both the abilities and the interest to bring about improvement in their home countries, but thanks to the very same abilities they were also the most likely to emigrate in order to first of all improve their own lives. Put in one sentence, Mićanović and her peers were caught between civic responsibility and personal ambitions. As a result, qualifying people ended up reinforcing outward migration rather than supporting local development.

During the Q&A with the audience, the negative side effects of education as well as the more general question of what could keep people at home or make migrants return, were the major topics of discussion. In the view of

Anita Richter, despite the concerns Andrea Mićanović had raised, there was no alternative to improving education in the Western Balkans and reducing skills mismatch, as also Edo Omić had called for. That was because even educated people in the Western Balkans were lacking the skills that were required on the market and, as a result, potential investors simply could not find the people they needed. However, Richter did concede that the challenge of people emigrating in order to use their new skills abroad was real and enormous and had to be addressed in light of an increasingly widening wage gap.

Responding to the subsequent question of what could be done to motivate well educated people to stay in their home countries, Andrea Mićanović suggested that more data be collected on how many youths had left and why. On the basis of these insights, a new narrative could be forged that young people were important and welcome to stay in their home country to increase their feeling of commitment. This should be done in conjunction with fostering youth activism in the region and co-operation among the Western Balkans, not only economically but also socially through joint education programmes. With regard to education, she agreed with the previous speakers that skills mismatch should be addressed by offering more practical education as well.

Finally, Omić further elaborated his aforementioned thoughts on ramping up investment in education by implementing what he called “targeted education”. This would specifically address the gaps in the current system. Underlining his point, he claimed that the most educated in the Western Balkans were still equal in terms of generic qualifications to Western Europe’s bottom 25 percent in the Pisa score. This urgently had to be improved.

On the issue of migrant departures and their possible returns, the audience was especially interested in how people from the Western Balkans could be motivated more to take up the fight with the high level of corruption locally rather than to leave, and in how the social stigma that potential returnees would be facing, could be addressed. One speaker also won-

dered whether the COVID-19 pandemic might have unleashed a general change in work cultures towards teleworking, which could cause people to work in Western Europe but live in the Balkans.

While the last suggestion was generally deemed unlikely for various reasons (unsustainable working method, question of tax base, potential for drops in salaries), Richter did see the possibility of future digital jobs being outsourced from Western Europe. In this scenario, the Western Balkans could be a taker of these jobs, but they would be competing with African countries. Therefore, improving people’s qualifications was, yet again, crucial. Meanwhile, her interpretation of the great demand for jobs in the public sector was that there was an untapped potential for entrepreneurialism, which could be activated if the right socio-economic conditions were created that would give people the necessary stability to try. Finally, Richter curtailed her optimism however by reminding everyone that there were also other, socio-cultural and political, reasons why people were emigrating from the Western Balkans.

In this vein, the speakers also had a vivid exchange on the nexus of corruption, emigration and returns. According to Mićanović, this topic, too, was linked to education. In her view, it was young people’s lack of a civic formation as well as the dominant narrative that for them the biggest success would be to leave the country and make it abroad that were holding them back from getting politically involved. This narrative was already transmitted at high school. Agreeing with Richter, she expressed that the economics were not the only reason why young people were leaving but also the feeling that it was sheerly impossible for them to succeed in their country other than by means of nepotism. Her own case showed that it was possible, Mićanović said, but it was a rare exception.

Along the same line, Omić claimed that the likelihood that someone would come back once they were in Germany, was extremely low. While corruption certainly had a major negative impact, he added that when people were getting older, they were increasingly thinking about their children and the opportunities these

would or would not have as well as the health care system they were subjected to. Both of these were considerably better abroad than in the Balkans. Hence, even if people could be convinced at a young age to stay home, it was highly important to create the respective infrastructure so that they would also stay in the long run.

Spotlights on Migration Experiences

The panel was presented by *Frank Morawietz*, Managing Director Crossborder Factory / Special Envoy for Southeast Europe, Franco-German Youth Office (FGYO), Berlin and *Antje Müller*, Programme Director, Zoran Djindjic Internship Programme of German Business, Berlin. The Panel lists were *Milena Popin* (32), Belgrade: "Life abroad was like brain storming, and the fine tuning of ideas came after I came back to my home country." *Ismar Hačam* (29), Berlin / Sarajevo: "The reasons why I left my home country became clear to me when I arrived here, when I realised that I can enjoy more possibilities and a life where I can express myself more freely." *Maja Baumschabel* (28), Zagreb: "Living abroad inspired me to see the opportunities I did not want to miss back home." *Uroš Milutinović* (19), Ljubljana / Belgrade: "I decided to move from my home country because I didn't feel that there was enough freedom and I think that young people don't have a good future there."

What does it feel like to migrate from the Western Balkans to Western Europe as a young person? What does the decision-making process that such a person goes through look like, and how does it feel to return home after having lived abroad? To find answers to these questions, the second panel debate was followed by a round of personal accounts by young people from the Balkans who had migrated to Western Europe themselves. Their composition reflected different stages and types of migration with *Milena* and *Maja* having gone back to their countries of origin, *Ismar* still living in Germany, and *Uroš* having moved from Serbia to Slovenia. Their stories gave in-depth insights into the lived experiences behind a range of the topics that were discussed throughout the conference.

Milena from Belgrade shared her experiences from her stay in Germany where she had gone

to gain work experience at a local company. As an illustrative example, she told how differently her father and mother had reacted to her moving abroad. While her mother was delighted to know her in the Federal Republic, associating it with high-quality products and abundant cultural heritage, her father was rather worried about her being so far away on her own and felt relieved upon her return. *Milena*, meanwhile, steered a middle course: for her, it was clear that Serbia was her home and that she would go back, and it was for this reason that she wanted to make the most out of her stay abroad. Her story parallels those of many Erasmus students from across the EU who are more driven by pull than push factors, and who subsequently bring their newly gained knowledge back home. Listing what she had liked about the work culture she had experienced in Germany, *Milena* was a personified example of how professional exchange across borders was contributing to local development.

In a similar vein, *Maja* from Zagreb said of herself that she had been proud to be coming home from abroad, despite having had professional opportunities there. That was because living abroad made her realise that the grass was always greener on the other side and that what made her home country unique were her family, friends and language – things that she would not want to miss. Contrastingly to her own way of reasoning, she said that most people in Croatia thought that if one had an opportunity in Germany, one should seize it with both hands. For her, however, the experience rather was eye-opening in the sense that she came to see that this was not what she actually wanted and what would make her happy. Her example conveyed how in many Western Balkan countries today, it simply is held to be a social consensus that life abroad is superior to life back home, putting expectations and aspirations into the heads of both leavers and stayers. And it shows how social embeddedness remains the main factor behind a circular migration with destination "home."

Quite different was the perspective of *Ismar* from Sarajevo who decided to move to Berlin "very spontaneously" when he received a scholarship to study at a university in Germany. For a

long time, he had been planning to study more and once arrived by the Spree, he said that life in Germany was “perfect.” He had run away from nationalism in Bosnia and while he was conscious that this also existed in Germany, he stressed that in his new home, “at least,” he could be a political activist and have the feeling that he could achieve something in doing so. In Bosnia, in contrast, such activism seemed rather hopeless. Ismar’s example made tangible why the lack of opportunities both in an economic and a civic sense was so hard to bear for many young people in the Balkans: because not only did their situation feel bad, but also it felt like it was impossible to improve it – so you might as well leave.

Uroš from Belgrade strongly affirmed *Ismar*’s remarks on the role of civil rights in his decision to emigrate: for him, Serbia was “a dark place” where young people were educated in a “chauvinistic and sexist” way and where the free media was “oppressed.” In this light, he regarded the lack of economic prosperity in Serbia as only one of many reasons behind young people’s emigration next to the equally important lack of human rights and the omnipresence of nationalism that were pushing the young and outward-looking abroad.

As a result, *Uroš* took on the mindset of his cosmopolitan age-mates across the EU in wanting to use his studies to live in as many European countries as possible, or as he put it: “I want to take in as much Europe as I can. I will try to continue doing so, and maybe I will settle down at some point, maybe even back home – but I don’t think so.” *Uroš*’ example shows how for many young people from the Balkans, the EU is more than just a bigger labour market but embodies the promise of a better, more “advanced” and more fulfilling life overall in various regards. Inspired by transnational public discourses and the globalisation of ideas, youths such as *Uroš* start experiencing a “culture war” in their home country and aspire to live a life in conformity with their values and sense of identity, which they hope to find abroad.

During the subsequent discussion led by the moderators who themselves worked with young

people from the Balkans, this panel also especially focused on the topic of education. Addressing the issue from the vantage point of businesses and economic development, *Maja* reiterated the claim made in the previous panel debates that education in the Western Balkans should provide students with more practical experience. This was echoed by *Milena* who regarded it as a problem that many Balkan youths were staying very long at university, being intellectually educated upon graduation but then having no job opportunities whatsoever.

Moreover, *Milena* criticised the Serbian school system for prioritising respect for authority over the ability to think critically, discuss ideas and seek explanations. Also, *Ismar* criticised the education he had previously received along these lines, demanding that a greater emphasis be placed on such vital generic skills as mentioned above rather than on students’ aptitude to memorise things. Finally, *Uroš* added to this that there was a dire need for sexual education in the Balkans to combat misogyny and transphobia as well as to prevent teenage pregnancies. As he succinctly put it at the end of his remarks: “We must move away from a view of society in which women are in the kitchen and men go to war with our neighbours.”

Panel III: Domestic Reforms (1) – Towards a Better Match of Skills and Labour Markets

This panel was presented by *Anja Quiring*, Regional Director South Eastern Europe, German Eastern Business Association, Berlin. The panelists were *Nora Hasani*, Managing Director, German-Kosovar Business Association, Prishtina, *Ivana Aleksić*, Senior Education Consultant Wider Europe, British Council, Belgrade, *Boris Jokić*, Higher Research Associate, Institute for Social Research, Zagreb, *Barbara Gerber*, Head of Global Professional Education Dräxlmaier Group, Vilsbiburg and *Françeska Muço*, Secretary General of the “Young Professionals Network”, Youth Representative of Albania at RYCO, Tirana.

The topical thread of improving education in the Western Balkans and reducing the skills mismatch young people were experiencing, was continued in the third panel discussion of the second conference day, which sought to identify

solutions to the problem. How can the youth be better prepared for the challenges of future labour market transformations? What changes in the system would this require, and how could these be brought about? In the context of outward migration, this panel, too, tackled the question of how young people from the Balkans could on the one hand receive better skills and on the other be prevented from using these to work abroad.

As crystallized over the course of the discussion, the crux of the problem was essentially the chicken-or-egg question of what had to come first to the region: skills or jobs? As long as young people could not make use of their abilities in their local surroundings, they were likely to leave the region altogether. However, without an improvement of their skills, the region was unlikely to attract any future investments that could provide such jobs. Moreover, the panel hotly debated the general purpose of education and whether it was more important to train young people so that they could meet the expectations of foreign investors or to educate them so they would become politically active and reshape the economy and society bottom-up.

In her introductory remarks, *Ivana Aleksić* described the current state of vocational training in the region and how its shortcomings were partly responsible for preventing young people from finding employment. She pointed out that the more students were progressing to the next level of education, the more expenses they would incur. This created institutionalised structures of exclusion and made a high educational level simply unattainable for many. As a result, the main body of jobseekers had few professional alternatives and most of them came away empty-handed. But also, those who did attain a higher level of education were struggling to find fitting jobs, as they were lacking practical experience. Taken together, this made it very difficult for the young to enter the labour market in the first place.

Based on her experience of both the German vocational education system and the local context in the Western Balkans, *Barbara Gerber* agreed that there was a strong need for more

professional training in the region. However, while “the German way” could serve as a role model and source of inspiration, the solution could not be to simply transplant it to South-east Europe. This was because professional education systems always had to be adapted to their specific surroundings in terms of job market, national comparative advantage and general education system. Moreover, the specific skills that were required of young people today very much depended on the respective company: while big companies were increasingly going towards automation and therefore needed engineers and technical experts to steer and maintain their machines, smaller companies were likely to have less specified needs. To meet this challenge, Dräxlmeier Group was co-operating with the government of North Macedonia to build a new professional education system together. As part of that, a pilot project had been launched, reaching out to and building relations with companies abroad.

On this note, a short video clip by German English-language broadcaster Deutsche Welle was shown, presenting young Kosovars using their German language skills to work in Kosovo-based German call centres. In the view of one of the interviewees, the job combined the best of both worlds, allowing for German working conditions and a life in Kosovo. As a result, the interviewee professed to no longer having any interest in moving abroad.

Reacting to this example, *Nora Hasani* further zoomed in on the Kosovar case, sharing her insights from working on the ground. Although Kosovo had the highest concentration of German speakers outside the German-speaking world and many investors were happy to set up their call centres there, youth unemployment was still at a staggering 70 percent and nine out of ten Kosovar women did not engage in paid labour. This showed that having only the customer service sector move to Kosovo from abroad was not enough. Instead, she posed the question of what could be done to link German investors looking for skilled workers at the cost of low wages more with the qualified Kosovar labour force. According to her impression, it was as if the two were “living in two different universes”.

To address this issue, more programmes creating such connections were needed. The German development agency GIZ had already set great examples in this regard, however, they were all “too small and too specific”, *Hasani* said. At the same time, more effort should be invested in spreading information among Kosovars on what kinds of skills were required of them. In this context, an obstacle at the social level was that there were societal expectations towards young people in Kosovo to obtain a university degree in law or social sciences, even though the private sector needed completely different, more mechanical knowledge. This had to be communicated better in order to induce a cultural change that could help reduce the aforementioned skills mismatch.

As a researcher in educational studies, *Boris Jokić* took a somewhat different view from *Hasani*'s, arguing that if the Western Balkans only focused on teaching their youths technical skills, they would reify their position at the lowest end of the global supply chain and keep the region from advancing to a Western European economic level more generally. In his vivid plea, he emphasised that the Western Balkans had to ask themselves if they just wanted to be “the mechanics for the developed world” or if they aspired to more; the countries of the region had been a place of education for centuries and they were not simply the backyard of Europe to serve Western economies.

Juxtaposing the needs of the economy and the needs of the people, *Jokić* pointed to the social significance of education for the functioning of civil society and asserted that the first priority had to be the enhancement of young people's involvement in politics to ensure that they themselves were building the societies they wanted to live in and were leading autonomous, fulfilling lives. To achieve this as well as to equip young people with the ability to adapt to an ever faster changing economy, the education systems of the Western Balkans should move towards greater attention to generic intellectual skills that could be used in various settings. But this necessitated educational reforms with a long-term perspective, which were rarely seen on the horizon of Balkan day-to-day politics.

Likewise, *Françeska Muço* in her analysis described the education systems of the Western Balkans to be steeped in the traditions of their respective old political regimes. Therefore, more effort had to be made to transition to an education system that would teach students critical thinking and other civic skills that were the prerequisite for a vibrant democracy that young people would contribute to. In the same spirit, she also suggested that creating more labour unions in the region would be a step towards creating more decent employment as well. Right now, young people were either accepting bad working conditions or leaving the country for good, but hardly any of them were taking the initiative to do something about the grim situation they were in. This had to be changed.

Overall, it became apparent that the different conceptions of what education was all about led to different conclusions as to what should be the primary goals of possible reforms. Taking a closer look at the speakers' statements, one, however, starts to realise that these differences are not as big as they might seem. In essence, both views argue for an education system that provides students with more applicable knowledge and skills – be those practical and in the technical domain, or intellectual and of a more generic nature. But for each side it was clear that young people would need to be educated in a more stimulating way that prepared them to become active and agile both as citizens and jobseekers. Finally, linking back to the preceding panel debates and the aforementioned collective action problem, this discussion made even more clear that the key challenge was how to steer young people from improving their personal lives towards improving the wider economy and political system.

During the Q&A session, a vivid discussion among the 100 attendants flared up in the chat function, lamenting that even the education system was pervaded with corruption. A central question was then what the EU could do to help in light of the previously discussed topic of the negative side effects of improving people's qualifications. As *Ivana Aleksić* put it, a notorious saying in the Western Balkans was: “Train them and they will leave. Don't train them and they will stay.” But only making people stay

could not be an aim in itself if the conditions were as bad as they were. Hence, there was no alternative to stepping up training efforts in her view. This was seconded by *Barbara Gerber*, who argued that even if the majority would leave, some would always stay, and those few were enough to send a signal to foreign companies that investment was possible. Attracting such investors required a long-term strategy and would cause collateral losses along the way in terms of emigrating youths. But without it there simply was no future for the Western Balkans at all.

Boris Jokić and *Nora Hasani*, too, found the lack of a long-term vision to be a major problem: politicians were not willing to take risks, local companies were not ready to invest in their employees' training, and while the citizenry was seeking a better education for their children, they did not do so through organised long-term pressure on their governments. According to *Françeska Muro*, this was due to the concomitant absence of the rule of law: under such conditions, people were just not motivated to invest their energies in a country where their efforts might simply "evaporate".

Finally, the panel turned to the issue of perceptions. *Nora Hasani* criticised that Kosovo's reliance on remittances worth a yearly 800 million Euro was creating a two-class society between recipients and non-recipients and the impression that making money was easy in Germany whereas working in Kosovo was pointless. Similarly, *Ivana Aleksić* said that the corruption of the education system had lowered its quality to such an extent that people no longer regarded having a degree as actually meaningful. In *Barbara Gerber's* experience, this then created a toxic stigma of Balkan youths as being "lazy" and "useless", which was a major obstacle to attracting foreign companies and urgently had to be fought.

Panel IV: Domestic Reforms (2) – Strengthening Good Governance and the Inclusiveness of Policymaking

The panel was presented by *Valbona Zeneli*, Chair of Strategic Initiatives Department, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Garmisch-Partenkirchen. The panellists

were *Marko Kmezić*, Senior Researcher, Center for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz, *Genoveva Ruiz Calavera*, Director for Western Balkans, DG NEAR, European Commission, Brussels, *Dafina Peci*, Secretary General of the National Youth Congress, Crossborder Factory, Tirana and *Lorenta Kadriu*, Representative of the Youth and Women Leadership Program, Partners Kosova Center For Conflict Management, Prishtina.

How can we restore hope? This was the overarching question with which *Valbona Zeneli* opened the fourth and final panel debate of the second conference day. Another conclusion that had gradually arisen from the different discussions throughout the day was that what was driving young people out of the Balkans were not only the present conditions but also the prospect that these were unlikely to change in the near future. The fact that young people perceived the situation in such a way that with regard to possible change it made no difference whether they stayed or not, came out as a key element of the problem. *Zeneli* therefore congratulated the organisers of the conference for having invited this many representatives of the Balkan youth so that this discussion was not only about but also with them. Now, how could this become the case in actual policymaking, too?

Marko Kmezić, originating from Serbia and now working in Austria, presented his latest research on public perceptions in the Western Balkans on what was necessary to obtain a good job and what was seen to be the biggest problems of the region. In summary, people of the Balkans were predominantly convinced that to succeed in one's career, one neither needed education nor a particular family background but above all social capital, that is, one had to know the right people. Seen against this backdrop, it came as no surprise that in earlier surveys, the biggest problems were perceived to be unemployment and corruption.

Strikingly, however, migration was nowhere to be seen among the findings back then, suggesting that most people deemed it to be a solution rather than a problem. But this has changed over the past five years, when corruption overtook unemployment in perceived importance

and migration suddenly entered the list of issues, directly jumping ahead of unemployment as well. Clearly, the gradually accelerating rate of leavers had become a concern to local societies, too. The survey data finally also triggered new hypotheses on what could have led to this change, indicating that rising inequalities, in particular between the generations, had also come to be seen as important problems in the Western Balkans.

Addressing this intergenerational gap as well, *Dafina Peci* presented a range of ideas on what could be done to make policymaking in the Western Balkans more inclusive of young people's perspectives. In doing so, she pictured the Western Balkan youth as highly heterogeneous with big differences between the rural and the urban population as well as according to the level of education. With this in mind, her central proposal was that government had to step up its communications between the top policy level and the local level. Otherwise, government policies were facing a high risk of being poorly implemented on the ground, wasting efforts and energies, and fuelling citizens' frustrations.

Following Peci's points on the rural-urban divide as an obstacle to inclusive policymaking, *Lorenta Kadriu* drew the attention to the exclusion of people from minority backgrounds and those outside political parties. She herself had organised an advocacy campaign for more inclusion of Kosovo's ethnic and religious minorities in the political process. On this basis, she reported that because minorities were under-represented in the dominant parties, it was hard for them to get their voices heard. In fact, this problem applied to most young people in Kosovo. Rather than suggesting for them to join parties, however, Kadriu called for the institutionalisation of more consultations with youth and minority representatives by leading parliamentarians. Getting involved in politics as a young person had been incredibly difficult for her despite her majority background, *Kadriu* said, from which she concluded that the road to inclusion had to be even rockier for minority members.

In response to the analyses and suggestions put forward by the three young professionals

from the Balkans, *Genoveva Ruiz Calavera* provided an elaborate insight into the reasoning of the European Commission on the matter. Essentially, her statement synthesised various points that had been raised during the preceding discussions into one big analysis and subsequent action plan. Her point of departure was that the Commission and many politicians across the EU were very concerned about the brain drain from the Western Balkans because no country had a future without a talented youth. To stop this, young people had to be integrated better into their local economies and political systems. This would be achieved on the one hand through job creation and facilitated access to financing possibilities for start-up companies and on the other hand by improving young people's skill sets. However, in parallel with previous assessments of the day, Ruiz Calavera stressed that this had to be done in conjunction with political reforms that would consolidate participatory democracy, the rule of law, and public finances. Moreover, it was important to stir up a cultural change away from corruption over to a system based on merit.

To get there, *Ruiz Calavera* declared that the onus was on the countries of the Western Balkans to make the first step. It was them who had to be seriously committed to fulfilling the criteria set out by the EU: "They really must want it", she said, mentioning Albania as a positive example and calling for the rest to "roll up their sleeves and get to work". However, it was crucial that these reforms were implemented for intrinsic motives and were not just fulfilled in order to reach accession. Rather, by the end of the accession process, governments should stick to these reforms every day.

Meanwhile, the Commission's recommendations to the national authorities were very clear. But it was them who had to implement them, as there was no one-size-fits-all. Answering worries she had come across in the region, Ruiz Calavera finally underlined that EU funds were directly benefitting the people of the Western Balkans, not the elites, and there were strict mechanisms to control that this was happening. It was self-evident in her view that the EU could not leave the region to its own devices. But it

was “every single country” who had to fulfil the EU’s “very clear” requirements.

At the start of the Questions and Answers, two members of the audience told their personal stories of the lack of opportunities that they had faced. While the first speaker expressed her regret at not having been able to study in Spain due to the unavailability of any scholarships or grants that would have sufficed to help her bridge the economic difference with her home country Croatia, the second speaker from Kosovo vented his anger about the fact that he had received university degrees with high grades and still could not find a job all whilst he was seeing his government indulging in corruption, as he said. “How could I *not* want to leave my country?”, he asked on a final note.

The two testimonies of the unfulfilled desire to leave the Western Balkans sparked a debate among the panellists on how the region could be made more attractive for young people to stay – and to return. Put another way, *Valbona Zeneli*, who herself was from the region and had never moved back after she had left for her studies, put the question to the discussants of how *circular* migration could be engendered, that is young people going abroad to gain experiences and maybe earnings, and subsequently returning to their countries of origin.

In response, *Ruiz Calavera* began her statement with the words: “Please stay. If the youth does not bring the change we want to see in the region, who will?” She then added that there were “no shortcuts for EU accession” as it was a merit-based process and thus demanded a lot of persistence. To make the region more attractive, Ruiz Calavera believed that private investments had to be attracted from abroad, bringing new opportunities right to the homes of the young people. For this to happen, public investment in the Western Balkans’ rural areas, infrastructure and digitalisation was needed. Moreover, the Western Balkans should create a common regional market because the small size of each country’s national market was inhibiting international companies from setting foot in them. Finally, she expressed her understanding for the young people’s frustration but assured them that they could count on the European Commis-

sion to do its best to help the Western Balkans reach their goals and make their home region desirable a place to be in.

Adding to this, the three young speakers from the Balkans on the panel contributed a few ideas on what else could be done. *Kmezić* suggested that EU funds be diverted from Western Balkan countries that were violating the rule of law and principles of liberal democracy. Moreover, the EU could consider financially compensating the Western Balkans for the brain drain they were suffering as Western Europe evidently was benefitting from the incoming labour force, such as medical workers and the like. With regard to incentivising people to return to the Balkans, however, *Kmezić* was more pessimistic, saying: “We cannot bring people back. They can only decide to do so on their own. We need to find ways to convince people to stay in the first place.” The concept of circular migration for him was unrealistic.

Peci and *Kadriu* furthermore explained that, as such, young people did want to stay in their home countries but the reasons for which they ended up leaving were very legitimate. *Peci*, for example, was born in another country and still she had decided to live in Albania. But that, she underlined, was thanks to her individual circumstances which were favourable to doing so. The governments and political parties of the Western Balkans had to seek greater contact with civil society, moving from mere dialogue to institutionalised partnerships, and should openly address the issue of young people’s impending emigration. To stimulate this process, the EU’s IPA funding should be made conditional on efforts to do so.

By the same token, *Kadriu* demanded that governments in the Western Balkans recognise more that young people could make substantial contributions to the process of political reform and therefore should be given more ownership of the process. Still, both of them also acknowledged that little would happen if young people themselves did not commit to making their voices heard. Picking up on this, *Zeneli* concluded the discussion with her final remark that “young people will not be *given* more space – they will need to claim it”.

Panel V: Joint Measures to Foster Circular Migration and Remigration

The panel was presented by *Daniel Göler*, Professor, Geographic Migration and Transition Studies, University of Bamberg. The panellists were *Birgit Glorius*, Professor, Human Geography, Main Focus on European Migration, Technical University Chemnitz, *Monica Roman*, Professor, Department of Statistics and Econometrics, Bucharest University of Economics, *Jelena Predojević-Despić*, Research Associate, Institute of Social Sciences, University of Belgrade, *Alida Vračić*, Director, Think Tank Populari, Sarajevo and *Samir Beharić*, Board Member of the Western Balkans Alumni Association, Jajce.

In the first panel discussion of the last conference day, the panellists explored measures to enhance the Western Balkans' workforces of all skills and professions. They focused on the likelihood of and best measures to foster remigration for those who would like to return to their countries of origin as well as the potential of circular migration between the EU and the region. The debate included examples from existing policies in the region as well as Southeast European Member States' experiences in this field and focused on policy approaches, design, impact and potential EU support in this area. Prior to the discussion, a short video clip by German English-language broadcaster Deutsche Welle was shown, introducing the topic. The 3-min documentary presented a young journalist who, after living for three years in Prague and Berlin, returned to his home country Serbia and expressed the motives that made him come back.

The panel discussion began with moderator *Daniel Göler* asking *Birgit Glorius* about her recent study on Bulgarian students who graduated abroad: how and why do young people take the decision to stay in the host country of their graduation? Why do they return to their country of origin? *Glorius* clarified that it was emigrants' life-stages that most strongly influenced the decision of either staying in the country of destination or returning to their country of origin. The main reasons to return to their country of origin were, first, that they had plans to return before leaving their countries and, second, the importance of the social contacts in their home

countries, such as their families and friends. Economic reasons, *Glorius* emphasised, mostly were not a driver for remigration.

Still, *Glorius* cited a respondent: those returning were "those who want to grow". They regarded remigration as beneficial to their career development and were committed to benefitting their home country. By bringing back knowledge to their country of origin, which was not as developed as the country of destination, many would see opportunities in both: developing a career because in their home country career paths were not as settled as in the destination countries, and in helping to develop their countries of origin.

Regarding the success of remigration, *Glorius* pointed out that especially people who returned spontaneously were experiencing struggles integrating into the labour market. A return to the country of origin needed preparation that mostly would take place in transnational networks of people who already returned and shared their experiences. These networks were not governmentally organised but would rather be private networks or initiated by NGOs. The valuable contribution of these networks was also to tackle information asymmetries between oftentimes pessimistic expectations of high obstacles upon returning and the mostly relatively good circumstances for integration that they would find in the country.

Jelena Predojević-Despić argued that permanent residence in destination countries was still the predominant form of emigration, however, there was a significant increase in transnational migrant activities that was also the case among emigrants from the Western Balkans. Especially transnational entrepreneurs were the ones that would be able to contribute significantly to their home country's economy because they were well-connected, both in their country of origin and destination.

Alida Vračić criticised that the solution to the problem of emigration should not be limited to remigration efforts of emigrated citizens but rather should focus on incentivising immigration into the Western Balkans in general, including immigrants from third countries. *Vračić*

emphasised that notwithstanding the help of the EU and other organisations, it was the countries of origin that had to resolve the issue of emigration. Focusing on the concept of brain drain therefore was wrong since those who did not emigrate would be regarded as unworthy and unable to make the change necessary. The concept of brain drain added even more destructive pressure on people staying in the region. *Vračić* elaborated that especially small countries could only benefit from emigration since the driving forces of technological innovation would be mostly located in bigger, economically more prosperous countries. Remigration and the subsequent technology transfer increased economic prosperity in the country of origin and this was an incentive for immigration from third countries.

Samir Beharić agreed with *Vračić* and criticised the predominant mindset in the Western Balkans that individuals were only considered successful if they left their home country. People were pushed to leave the country because there was the impression that there was no future in the home country. As a result, the public discussion about the topic in the region had to change. But he criticised the idea of *Vračić* to fill up the gaps left by the emigrants with immigration from third-countries because in contrast to Western Europe, there was not enough migration to the Western Balkans to replace leaving doctors, nurses or other important professionals, *Beharić* said.

Still, the circumstances in the home countries desperately had to be improved, especially considering that in a study with scholarship holders from the Western Balkans currently studying in the EU, *Beharić* discovered that those willing to remigrate were the vast majority of respondents. Surprisingly only a minority did not consider going back to their countries of origin. Most respondents expressed the intention to remigrate but currently did not see any opportunity to find an occupation matching their skills. Questions and comments from the audience raised the issue of the lack of best practice examples necessary to show opportunities in the home country – remigration strategies should therefore include more peer-to-peer education.

Daniel Göler presented the result of an audience survey on the question of whether returning to their home country would currently be a realistic perspective for young emigrants to which 30 percent replied “yes” and 60 percent of the respondents replied “no”. Regarding that result, *Göler* asked the panellists if circular migration or return migration was less important than first creating an attractive environment for returnees? Or whether the return of young people was the key to improvement? *Birgit Glorius* concluded that there could not be a clear answer to that question. More transparency on opportunities and constraints regarding remigration was necessary since it was a very personal assessment. The perceptions and preferences of good circumstances for returning home were changing over time.

Monica Roman reaffirmed that circular migration was beneficial to labour markets and migrants themselves because of the greater experience and knowledge of returnees. Return migration should therefore be encouraged by countries with high population outflows. This could be pursued by increasing the wages of state employees to prevent emigration and by encouraging entrepreneurship for returnees with financial incentives. Subsequent success stories could serve as new best practices shaping a more optimistic perspective on the issue.

Jelena Predojević-Despić added that migration flows were not restricted to highly educated individuals but also included low-skilled temporary or seasonal workers who did not have sufficient language skills to successfully integrate into the destination countries. Hence, it was important to increase the co-operation between countries of origin and destination to reach agreements on healthcare by way of example which could incentivise remigration. For the most part, low-skilled temporary or seasonal workers were not included in migration statistics and therefore a systematic monitoring of these migration flows would be necessary.

Alida Vračić stressed that it was the responsibility of the governments of the Western Balkan countries to create the circumstances needed to prevent emigration. So far, *Vračić* criticised, no single comprehensive long-term strategy to pre-

vent emigration had been issued by any Western Balkan government. The region needed a role model; it was necessary that one Western Balkan country would start a comprehensive strategy to incentivise remigration for the other countries to follow. Since there were no significant changes in elite structures of the Western Balkan governments, Vračić would not expect any significant changes concerning policy approaches and emigration trends in the near future.

At the end of the discussion, *Samir Beharić* raised the issue of remittances and stated that they were not as big as one would expect, especially since an increasing number of relatives follow the emigrants and move to their countries of destination. Hence, he once more emphasised the need to prevent emigration and recommended to incentivise brain circulation within the region. The emigration of academics should be resolved through the liberalisation of visa restrictions within the Western Balkans and the establishment of an intra-regional student mobility programme similar to that of the *Erasmus programme* in order to prevent brain drain.

Panel VI: The Role of the Diaspora and Regional Relations

The last panel of the conference was presented by Michael Martens, Southeast Europe Correspondent, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Vienna. Panellists were *Nermin Oruč*, Director, Centre for Development Evaluation and Social Science Research (CREDI), Sarajevo, *Lumnije Jusufi*, Researcher, Department of Slavic and Hungarian Studies, Humboldt-University Berlin, *Silvana Mojsovska*, Professor in International Economics, University "Ss.Cyril and Methodius", Skopje, *Adem Gashi*, Team Leader, WB Youth Lab Project, Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Sarajevo and *Nikola Kandić*, Lawyer and Project Assistant, Youth Council of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo.

While governments in the Western Balkans can improve the situation using innovative policies, other institutions and the society can also make a change. The final panel therefore posed the question of the potential of the diasporas' engagement with their respective countries of origin, how governments of the region could support this engagement, the chances of tack-

ling the challenges jointly in formats of regional cooperation among the WB6, and the role the EU could play in this. The panellists discussed existing trends of diaspora engagement and regional cooperation, pointing to successful existing initiatives as well as the room for improvement.

Michael Martens opened the panel with a discussion on diverging diaspora voting patterns in different countries and the possible influence that diaspora votes can have on local political developments. *Nermin Oruč* argued that the political involvement of diaspora communities improved the co-operation between diaspora societies and home countries. Oruč regarded the role of the diaspora in the process of democratisation and political developments in the region as beneficial and referred to studies that would prove that. Oruč explained cases where diaspora voting patterns were less progressive than domestic ones with the visibility and presence of certain parties in the diaspora communities. But due to the ever younger and better educated emigrants the composition and political views of diaspora communities were changing. The reluctance of some local governments to include diasporas in political developments resulted from the perception of the diaspora community as a threat due to presumed political views.

In his second question, *Michael Martens* asked *Silvana Mojsovska* for arguments in favour of an increase in the mobility of professionals through a mutual recognition of university and practical degrees in order to augment intra-regional mobility. Why would people from one country with high emigration rates move to another country in the same situation? Would this really make a difference? *Silvana Mojsovska* explained that circular migration made it easier for individuals to come back to their countries of origin. Recognition of professional qualifications was a big challenge that still was not addressed. It was easier to work in Germany than in another Western Balkan country, *Mojsovska* stated. Mutual recognition of professional qualifications advocated within the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) was part of the regional co-operation effort and was strongly encouraged by the EU. Increased re-

gional mobility could help professionals remain in the region but still, EU integration would be far more appealing to people than integration at the regional level.

Therefore, *Mojsovska* said, one should raise the question of how to relate regional integration to the process of EU integration. In order to be employed at universities in the region one had to go through a lengthy bureaucratic procedure, which was one reason why academics preferred to leave for the EU, where it was easier for them to have their diplomas recognised. Another problem concerning emigration was the difficulty of knowing how many people had actually left the Western Balkans. Governments were relying on statistics from destination countries, which were not bullet-proof themselves. Shortage of reliable data was a major issue. As a first step to remedy this, population censuses and statistical analyses of the number of people remaining in a country could help.

Asking *Lumnije Jusufi* about the relationship between the diaspora and local communities, *Martens* wanted to know about the struggles of well-educated descendants of migrants willing to come back, especially in the field of academics. *Lumnije Jusufi* elaborated that the first struggle was the long and difficult process of diploma recognition. Additionally, job offerings often were linked to the requirement of citizenship or residence in the countries. Contact to academic institutions was often difficult for diaspora members with Albanian or Slavic-sounding names and students would even be excluded from Erasmus programmes from studying the Albanian language in Prishtina because of their Albanian-sounding names. One's passport or language skills were irrelevant because students with Albanian names would not be welcome to study Albanian language courses in Prishtina. Stereotypes of returnees were especially present in Kosovo where some returnees had big difficulties integrating into the local communities again. These were now trying to come back to Germany because everyday life was too difficult having a foreign accent.

Jusufi dismissed a question from the audience on whether it would make sense for EU governments to support young migrants with language

courses, referring to how things had been done in Germany in the past: migrant language courses were formerly provided for children of "gastarbeiters" with the intention of preparing them for their return to their home countries. But later they were stopped because the German state no longer wanted them to go back and these courses would not have helped integrating the migrant communities in Germany. If Germany payed for language courses it would have to be in other contexts, for example, not as a mother tongue but as foreign language courses.

Michael Martens wondered if emigrants' return after a long time living abroad with the intention to be politically active would be welcomed by local communities. *Lumnije Jusufi* explained that oftentimes, when emigrants tried to discuss politics, people claimed they had no idea of how politics and life actually worked on a local basis. Political opinion of the diaspora differed a lot from the local one. According to *Jusufi*, there was a big potential to influence the diaspora communities through media presence and personal visits. The visibility would make a big difference in voting patterns of diaspora communities. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had a lot of voting presentations in Germany which had a huge impact on Turkish diaspora voting patterns. A comment from the audience added that the openness to emigrants' political participation strongly depended on the political parties. Some, mostly traditional or nationalistic parties were not very prone to returnees' participation, but other parties were very open to diaspora and returnee participation.

Asking for the reasons of young people leaving their country, *Michael Martens* enquired from *Nikola Kandić* if there were any changes in the motivation since it was not only the "gastarbeiters" who were leaving these days. *Nikola Kandić* elaborated that unemployment was still the main reason behind the emigration of young people. But other reasons, such as a lack of trust in the local system resulting from rampant corruption in state administration, the business sector, the healthcare system and the academia was becoming more and more important. Therefore, reforms considering in particular the investment environment were desper-

ately needed in the home countries. Societies like that of Bosnia and Herzegovina were struggling with corruption as the biggest and most pressing issue.

Considering economic development, *Nermin Oruč* added, that Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) attraction strategies should target diaspora communities. Diaspora investors had the same concerns over the business climate of the countries as other investors, but unlike other investors, diaspora investors were willing to take higher risks or accept a lower return on investments because they would want to contribute to their local communities. Furthermore, diaspora investors were positively influencing the investment climate in communities with no tradition of investment attraction strategies.

Silvana Mojsovska discussed instruments to make investments from diaspora communities more attractive and emphasised that it was necessary to follow through on the plans of the Regional Economic Area (REA) with an economic agenda to strengthen regional cooperation. The plans formulated under the umbrella of the EU were, according to Mojsovska, nothing more than political pledges and intentionally not pursued because Western Balkan countries were all strongly dependent on FDI and would see each other as rivals competing for it. Therefore, actual skills and qualifications of local residents needed to be addressed. The IT industry had been benefitting from increasingly more FDIs in recent years thanks to more qualified locals. Concerning production companies, Mojsovska explained that they had free access to the EU market and hence only few incentives to work towards regional integration.

Adem Gashi strongly disagreed with Mojsovska's assessment of the REA and stated that extensive consultations were under way and big commitments to deliver concrete results on the REA would be made. The plans were ambitious and work to realise more regional economic integration was planned for the near future. Concerning digitalisation and roaming tariffs there had already been successful developments in recent years. Gashi asked to mind the Economic and Investment Plan of the EU which contained a nine billion Euro injection into the Western

Balkans and would be a big opportunity for regional initiatives that were foreseen.

Considering the current global COVID-19 pandemic, *Michael Martens* asked *Nikola Kandić* if he had any direct experience of health care system shortages in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Kandić explained the public perception of the healthcare system was worse than the healthcare system itself. The narrative was that the good doctors were in Germany and that the ones remaining in the region were either not good enough to go there or might even have fake diplomas. The thinking in the Western Balkans was that the quality of work of people who remained in the region, either in healthcare, the economy or academia had to be worse than the work of professionals who were working abroad. Knowledge of actual success stories in the region was not big enough – this would need to change.

Being asked to give an example of something that could change narratives in the region, *Nermin Oruč* presented his idea of a Western Balkans University that would be financed with EU funds and that would attract the Western Balkan diaspora to get involved in the region and simultaneously incentivise regional migration.

Spotlights on Conference Take-Aways

The panel was moderated by *Valeska Esch*, Deputy Executive Director, Program Director Europe, Aspen Institute Germany, Berlin. The panellists were *Đuro Blanuša*, Secretary General of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), Tirana, *Nora Hasani*, Managing Director, German-Kosovar Business Association (KDWV), Prishtina, *Dafina Peci*, Secretary General of the National Youth Congress, Crossborder Factory Tirana Office, Tirana, *Frank Morawietz*, Managing Director Crossborder Factory / Special Envoy for Southeast Europe, Franco-German Youth Office (FGYO), Berlin and *Tim Judah*, Balkan Correspondent, The Economist, London.

Before the end of the conference on 30 October 2020, moderator *Valeska Esch* asked the panellists and participants for their key take-aways of the International Conference “Young People, Migration and the Demographic Challenge in the Western Balkans.” The panellists unani-

mously regarded the conference as a big success, especially considering the importance of the issue at hand. According to the panellists, migration, demographic change, and brain drain were delicate topics in the Western Balkans. The focus on young people's emigration from the region as a central theme was necessary and especially complimented by the panellists.

Đuro Blanuša praised the opportunity for young people to study and work abroad as a major advantage and luxury they should take advantage of. At the same time, young people should bear in mind the implications such an opportunity had on their countries of origin and therefore try to engage in the development of their home countries. The demographic challenge the Western Balkans were facing were serious and governments should start addressing that problem with reforms, civic education and environmentally friendly policies in order to create better living conditions for citizens. The European integration of the Western Balkans was inevitable, and the conference had shown that young people from the region saw themselves as Europeans and were thinking in a European way.

Nora Hasani appreciated that the otherwise underappreciated youth from the region was the central topic of this conference. During the past three days the conference was one of the rare platforms where business representatives, academic experts as well as politicians from the Western Balkans countries were not only able to hear what the youth had to say, but actually had an opportunity to really listen to and understand their motives and reasons for leaving or staying in their countries of origin. It should be a top priority and in the interest of the EU and the Western Balkan countries to work on creating better opportunities for young people to work and live in their countries of origin. Investing in the youth would be a strategic win. What the Balkans needed were governments with a vivid vision for the future and politicians who were willing to walk the talk. Creating a better future for the Western Balkans should be a joint effort. The conference had revealed that the young people in the region had more in common than one would have expected and that there were more values connecting than

dividing them. Therefore, a regional approach was the only way to find solutions.

Dafina Peci concluded that despite good economic recovery, the situation on the labour market remained challenging with a slow pace of job creation and unemployment remaining high particularly among young people, women and marginalised groups. Additionally, the youth in the region needed to be better equipped with a wide range of skills. Future developments on the labour market would have to be anticipated in order to prepare the youth for the requirements of tomorrow. The willingness and motivation of young people in the Western Balkans to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes and policymaking needed to be recognised, supported and facilitated by the governments in the region.

Frank Morawietz complimented the clear decision to invite young citizens from the Western Balkans to such a high-level conference and to give them and their needs such a large space. Morawietz expressed that it was a big honour to work with such motivated and highly skilled young professionals. Simply talking to young people would not be enough, therefore Morawietz appealed directly to the politicians of the region to take action.

Tim Judah brought to mind that such a conference would have been unimaginable only a few years ago. The fact that the German Foreign Office, together with its partners, organised this conference showed that thinking had begun to change. While this was a big step, it immediately had become clear that this could only be seen the start of addressing the issues under discussion. Emigration, low fertility, and the lack of immigration into the Balkans were all playing together and therefore would need to be tackled together. The Western Balkans were a very dramatic example of demographic problems emerging all over Eastern Europe and many other parts of the world. The involvement of Western Balkan countries in coming conferences on the future of Europe was a good message and giving hope. Judah thanked the organisers for this important initiative regarding the global problem of demographic change.

Concluding Remarks by Ambassador Susanne Schütz, German Foreign Office

The Closing Speech of the Conference was delivered by Ambassador *Susanne Schütz*, Director for South-Eastern Europe, Turkey, EFTA States, OSCE and Council of Europe in the German Federal Foreign Office on 30 October 2020. She thanked Aspen Institute Germany and the Southeast Europe Association for their relentless effort to organise such a successful conference. Schütz also expressed her thanks to the attendants, politicians, officials, experts, journalists and young participants from the region. In spite of the challenging situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the conference nevertheless had enjoyed a very high attendance throughout its entire duration.

Citing German Foreign Minister *Heiko Maas*, Schütz once again reiterated his confirmation from the German government that the Western Balkans belonged to Europe. At the same time, Maas had made clear the necessity of reforms in the fields of rule of law and the fight against corruption. Schütz outlined that the conference put young people at the centre of the debate and gave them the opportunity to express their perspectives, definition of the current problems and suggestions to solve these. The ministers from the region had shown great openness to discuss with the young people and to take their views at heart. All six ministers had promised to address deficits at the level of corruption, the rule of law and red tape. "Europe, and above all the people from the region would take them up on it," Schütz reminded them. It had become very clear during the conference, she summed

up, that there is a need for more efforts regarding reforms in the mentioned fields if opportunities in the region were to be improved. Many young people and panellists had made very frank remarks that they felt a lack of sufficient progress. Therefore, the speed of reform within the countries in the region would need to increase in order to really make a difference.

Young people should be listened to and the mobility across the region as well as education opportunities should be improved, Schütz underlined. The concept of circular migration was something that would need to be explored further. Those who returned to the region were very valuable for their country's economy and society. At the political level, the Sofia Summit of the Berlin Process on 10 November 2020 would be the next milestone where, Schütz hoped, governments would reach tangible results, especially concerning regional economic integration. At the same time, Schütz welcomed that negotiations were continuing in an EU-led dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo.

The conference had shown that it was high time for the countries of the Balkans to overcome the shadows of the past in order to thrive and prosper and offer real opportunities to their citizens. Citing the conference participant *Genoveva Ruiz Calavera* from the European Commission that "migration should be a choice and not an obligation," Ambassador Schütz ended her concluding remarks with the hope that follow-up events with a physical presence would be possible in the not-too-distant future.