
International Conference on the Western Balkans **The Europe We Want. The Europe We Need 2020**

Organizer: Representation of North Rhine-Westphalia in Berlin, Southeast Europe Association, Federal Network for Civic Engagement with the support of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation

online via ZOOM, 21 / 22 October 2020

Report by Matilda Alku, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Alumni, Erfurt

Introduction

This two-day international conference brought together experts and political actors from the EU member states and the Western Balkan States to discuss the challenges these countries are facing in the European integration process and to give an outlook on what lies ahead in the future and what is the role and the outreach of civil society in accelerating this process.

The overarching aim of this conference was to initiate a process that supports civil society actors in the region in their European orientation and to build a platform of ongoing communication and shared efforts between different stakeholders involved in the complex and lengthy process of integration. The conference provided a valuable networking opportunity and set the stage for a further conference that will take place in 2021 with society actors from the Western Balkans and the EU member states.

The panels were guided by key questions, deemed as important to tackle the complexity of the role of civil society, challenges that it is facing and the steps that need to be taken. The questions were about the role civil society plays in the process of integration of the Western Balkans and about the instruments being necessary to support civil society better in fulfilling

this role. Another issue discussed was how the cooperation between civil society actors of different Western Balkans countries could be improved and if and how civil society could possibly contribute to improve cooperation between the different states. What role does cooperation between civil society actors in the EU and the Western Balkans play?

The conference began with the welcoming remarks by the Minister for Federal, European and International Affairs of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, Dr. Stephan Holthoff-Pförtner, and continued with keynotes and panel discussion on the above-mentioned topics. It concluded with more practice-oriented panels on what are the steps to be taken and what are the future commitments to be followed through after this event.

Day 1 – 21 October 2020, 2:00 pm – 7:30 pm Welcoming remarks and keynote speech

Opening the conference, Dr. *Stephan Holthoff-Pförtner*, highlighted that North Rhine-Westphalia, as a federal state of Germany at the heart of Europe with very strong economic and human ties to the Western Balkans, is constructively engaged in supporting the integration process of these countries and that as a minister he made this his top political priority. He stated that he strongly believes that the

future of the Western Balkan States lies in the European Union and that the stability of this region is in the interest of Germany and Europe.

Keynote speaker, Prof. Dr. *Florian Bieber*, Director of the Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz, talking on the subject of why a lively and diverse civil society is a central part of the European political model, noted the importance of defining and discussing the vision and the future of the European Union and involving the Western Balkan States and civil society in this discussion. "Part of what kind of Europe do these countries want to be in?" – asked Bieber.

The focus point of his keynote was the Rule of Law, as a primary condition for joining the European Union but at the same time as a problematic development within the European Union itself, touching upon fall backs of some member states in this regard. For *Bieber*, an establishment of mechanisms to ensure the Rule of Law and the democratic institutions within the EU first will be a catalysator to accelerate the integration process for the prospective members, too.

Panel 1: State of Play – What is the Current Role of Civil Society Regarding the Accession Process in the Western Balkans?

The featured speaker, *Alexandra Tomanić*, Executive Director of the European Fund for the Balkans, painted a rather dark picture of the Western Balkan region where hybrid regimes are flourishing, the state is captured and there is a big crisis of trust in democratic institutions. Taking all that into consideration, *Tomanić* underlined the importance of civil society in the region as a new energy and as the only hope for improvement.

Speaking about the work that the European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA) is doing in the region, *Antonella Valmorbida*, Secretary General of ALDA, said that their work is focused on two main pillars: empowerment of local authorities and empowerment of civil society. She highlighted the need for Europeanization and the democratization process to be expanded from the capitals into the local communities. She talked about the continuous struggle to

change the perception that European Integration is just a technicality, and to make people understand that at the end of the day, it is about improving their quality of living.

For *Krisela Hackaj*, executive director of the Co-operation Development Institute, the work of civil society in Albania and in the whole region is highly crucial. Having to deal with captured states, civil society at the moment seems to be the only reliable partner and ally to play the role of the watch dog in these countries. She underlined the importance of a substantial shift in the policy making process within the EU and added that the input of civil society should be taken more into consideration.

The panel discussion that followed was guided by questions posed by moderator *Mirko Schwärzel*, head of EU-Affairs, National Network for Civil Society, Germany who began by asking the panelists about the extent of the role of civil society in the integration process. There was much agreement among the panelists that civil society of the Western Balkan States should be included into discussions about the future of Europe. This was seen to be very important as there is the need to push the Western Balkan topic and not let it lose momentum.

Panel 2: Which instruments are Currently Available to Support Civil Society in the Western Balkans? What Are Their Strengths and Weaknesses?

The second panel discussion shifted the focus to the concrete instruments available to support civil society in the Western Balkans. Moderated by *Tobias Flessenkemper*, Member of the Board of the Southeast Europe Association, this panel tackled the question of the strengths and weaknesses of these instruments.

Dr. *Vedran Dzihic*, senior researcher at the Austrian Institute for International Politics and Vienna University, underscored the need for a radical change in the relations between the EU and civil society in the region. He added that the practice of seeing civil society as just an "add-on" to the integration process needs to be ended because "othering" of the Western Balkans will not bring the case any further. *Dzihic* highlighted the urge for a Europeanization pro-

cess being citizen orientated and wanted by those citizens instead of being imposed on them.

Goran Buldioski, director of the Open Society Initiative for Europe, touched upon the challenges of working in a very distrustful environment in the region and the efforts of his society to help building trust – by funding initiatives that are inclusive and by operating in the field of the human rights agenda.

Santiago Alonso Rodriguez, head of the Western Balkans Unit at the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, underlined that his ministry makes sure to include civil society actors in the design of development and cooperation projects. He sees it as an immensely helpful instrument in not only supporting civil society but also having them as partners in intergovernmental projects as well, creating a bridge of communication between the state and non-state actors.

Reporting from the point of view of the European Commission, *Genoveva Ruiz Calavera*, Director, directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations at the European Commission, stated that the role of the European Commission goes beyond than just funding; it is about promoting European values and empowering civil society as a crucial element in the Europeanization process of the Western Balkans.

A younger voice on the panel was *Paulina Fröhlich* from the European Hub for Civic Engagement & Head of Programme “Future of Democracy” at the “Progressives Zentrum”. She reflected on her experience as an activist and said that two very powerful tools were solidarity and support for civil society. Addressing the “shrinking space problem” that civil society is facing, especially in the Western Balkans, she said that the organization she represents is now searching for digital solutions to create platforms for civil society to network, to get to know each other and to create a possibility to share their projects and to work together.

Evening event: Consolidating the EU in the Western Balkans: A Challenge for Politics and Society

Stephan Holthoff-Pförtner held the opening remarks at the evening event and welcomed *Etilda Gjonaj*, Minister of Justice of the Republic of Albania, *Manuel Sarrazin*, Member of the Bundestag and President of the Southeast Europe Association, Prof. Dr. *Vesna Pusić*, former Minister of European and Foreign Affairs of Croatia and Member of Parliament and *Ivan Nikolovski*, researcher at the Center for European Integrations at the Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis”, Skopje and former president of the Young European Federalists North Macedonia.

While talking about the justice reform that Albania has undertaken, as a former activist herself *Etilda Gjonaj* recognized the driving force of civil society for the EU integration and stressed that more efforts should be put to overcome barriers for more active participation of civil society in the policymaking process.

Manuel Sarrazin tackled a challenging development in the region where civil society gets often pushed into also playing the role of the opposition. This puts civil society in a very hostile political environment, he added.

Vesna Pusić drew attention to the geopolitical dimensions of the integration process and stated that the EU needs to consolidate its position in the region and needs to keep the topic of the European perspective in the Western Balkans alive, in order to avoid the rise of anti-European sentiments.

Ivan Nikolovski, researcher at the Center for European Integration at the Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis”, called for a more precise inclusion of civil society into the policymaking process. According to Nikolovski, some of the present front runners of the integration process are being neither successful nor transparent with it.

Stephan Holthoff-Pförtner concluded the evening event by highlighting that the enlargement process needs the support from all the EU member states because the Western Balkans

belong in the EU, and Europe needs friends, partners, markets, and peace.

Day II – 22 October, 9:00 am – 1:00 pm

The second day of the conference was opened by *Manuel Sarrazin* who reviewed the first day of the conference and introduced the scope of the second day. Keynote speaker *Eva Maydell*, MEP, president of the European Movement International, focused her speech on the Europeanization of civil society and how this was crucial for Bulgaria during the accession process. Touching upon the Bulgarian European presidency, Maydell stressed that despite this being a government-run endeavor, it was actually civil society in Bulgaria which came up with concrete proposals regarding the theme of the presidency.

Panel 1: Cross-border Cooperation in Civil Society

The guiding questions of the first panel, chaired by *Florian Feyerabend*, desk officer for the Western Balkans at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, tackled the current situation of the cross-border cooperation in the Western Balkans. *Anna Rurka*, President of the Conference of the NGOs of the Council of Europe, noted that the Covid-19 pandemic has been a huge challenge to civil society. With gatherings not being allowed in the traditional form, a new form of activism has been entrenched.

On the question, if there are any parallels and differences between cross-border civil society cooperation in the EU Member States and in the Western Balkans, *Doede Sijtsma*, special commissioner for relations to Germany of the Dutch provinces Gelderland und South-Holland, depicted the Dutch-German model and how civil society had helped to create better relations between the two countries. He said that the first initiatives were local, made by city majors and local institutions that helped to improve the cross-border cooperation. Further on, he highlighted the necessity of the Rule of Law in both cross-border countries as a pivotal condition for good relations to be built.

Nikola Ristić, Communication and Visibility Officer at the Regional Youth Cooperation Office RYCO, talked about the dimensions of

cross-border intergovernmental organizations, such as dealing with six different governments, operating in a non-friendly political environment and including civil society actors in the process.

Panel 2: Steps forward

Chaired by *Dr. Jana Puglierin*, Head of the Berlin office of the European Council on Foreign Relations ECFR, the second panel addressed the current state of progress of the accession process, focusing on the role that civil society could play in accelerating it. She also emphasized the contribution this conference could make in facilitating the process.

Milan Nič, head of the Robert Bosch Center for Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), stated that the EU needed to adjust the political objectives regarding the region and to have a clearer approach in order to avoid the EU fatigue signs which are already seen in North Macedonia for instance.

Reflecting on the Romanian Model, member of parliament *Ovidiu Gant*, Romanian Chamber of Deputies, highlighted that the EU needs to be more consistent regarding enlargement requirements. Romania and Bulgaria by way of example had to undergo extremely strict and difficult reforms which continued even after the accession to the EU was executed. The effect of these reforms was incredibly positive in the long run. However, this was not the case for Croatia, *Gant* added up, which proves the inconsistency of the Conditionality Clause.

Ambassador *Susanne Schütz*, Director for South-Eastern Europe, Turkey and the EFTA States, German Foreign Office, stressed the commitment of the European Union to support the six Western Balkan states to join the EU as soon as possible, as their future belongs there. Their governments need support from civil society, she added and called for more active participation.

Milena Lazarevic, Programme Director, European Policy Centre, EPC, Belgrade, asked if civil society feels supported enough, said that the main problem her organization was facing is filling

the gap between good intentions and realities. She underlined that many of the contributions and proposals of civil-society institutions still fail to be a solid part of the policy-making process inside the EU institutions and in the home countries. Lazarevic called for more transparency, more “space” for civil society and for a more consistent and clear language from the EU partners.

Commitments: What Can Each of Us Contribute to Until the Next Conference? Development of a Roadmap.

The last panel chaired by Dr. *Mark Speich*, State Secretary for Federal, European and International Affairs and Plenipotentiary of North-Rhine Westphalia to the Federal Government, together with *Tobias Flessenkemper* and *Mirko Schwärzel* focussed on the concrete steps to be

followed until the follow-up conference next year.

As a first aim and commitment the inclusion of the Western Balkans in the Conference on the Future of Europe and in the discussions following up to this was identified. Promoting a further Europeanization process of the Western Balkans by supporting civil society who does the groundwork in this process as well as networking and fighting against the shrinking space were further aims, together with the empowerment of civil society in the region to be more effective in its efforts against the captured state phenomena. And, last but not least, it has to be identified if there has been any match-making in this conference that can be developed and financed further on.

Richtlinien für Autorinnen und Autoren

Berichte / Rezensionen

Formelle Vorgaben für den Text

Umfang: Tagungsberichte sollten maximal vier Seiten umfassen.

Rezensionen sollten 4.000 Zeichen incl. Leerzeichen nicht überschreiten. Bei mehr als 6.000 Zeichen muss die Rezension durch den/die Autor*in gekürzt werden.

Schriftart: Times New Roman, 12 pt, einzeilig

Formatierungen im Text:

- Keine automatischen Silbentrennungsprogramme einstellen.
- Keine manuellen Wort-Trennungen vornehmen.
- Linksbündig schreiben, kein Blocksatz.
- Keine Einzüge an Absatz-Anfänge bzw. Tab-Stops an Zeilenanfänge setzen.
- Zwischen den Absätzen eine Leerzeile setzen.
- Sonderzeichen können verwendet werden (z. B. Milošević). Möglichst jedoch keine kyrillischen oder griechischen Schriftzeichen – diese besser transliterieren.

Kursiv-Setzungen:

- Nur bei der ersten Nennung von Vor- und Nachnamen eines/einer Autor*in, der/die z. B. bei der Rezension eines Sammelbandes angeführt wird, oder bei Tagungsreferent*innen.
- Ansonsten lediglich inhaltliche Hervorhebungen, Fachausdrücke oder fremdsprachliche feste Begriffe in Kursiv setzen.
- Buch- oder Referatstitel, Autor*innen-Namen, Institutionen o. ä. nicht in Kursiv setzen – ggf. in Anführungszeichen.

Unentbehrliche Angaben

Folgende Angaben bitte dem Haupttext in der angegebenen Reihenfolge voranstellen:

bei Berichten (Tagungsberichten):

- Titel der Tagung,
- Veranstalter,
- Ort und Datum der Tagung,
- Vor- und Nachname des/der Berichtenden sowie Arbeitsort (z. B.: Bericht von Hans Mustermann, Kiel).

bei Rezensionen:

- Vor- und Nachname des/der Autor*in bzw. des/der Herausgeber*in (Hrsg.; Ed./Eds.),
- Titel des rezensierten Werkes,
- Erscheinungsort: Verlag und Erscheinungsjahr, Seitenzahl, ggf. in Klammern
Schriftenreihe (= ...), ISBN- oder ISSN-Angabe,
- Vor-, Nachname und Arbeitsort des/der Rezensent*in
(z. B.: Rezensent: Hans Mustermann, Kiel).

Rechtschreibung/Sprachregelung

Bitte verwenden Sie die neue deutsche Rechtschreibung – ggf. Text mit einem Rechtschreib-Programm überprüfen. Bitte verfassen Sie Ihren Text in einer geschlechterneutralen Sprache. Vermeiden Sie dazu das generische Maskulinum („Autoren“, „Politiker“, „Teilnehmer“) und ersetzen Sie dies durch Nennung beider Geschlechter oder durch verkürzte Paarformen (z. B. AutorInnen, Autor(innen), Autor*innen).