

FINAL VERSION

Western Balkans Civil Society's Call to Action

September 2022

Collective voice of participants in the “Roundtable with Civil Society from the Western Balkans on Challenges of European Integration” convened by the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU in cooperation with the CEELI Institute and the Forum 2000 Foundation. Prague, 8-9 September 2022.

A. Critical Assessment of Current Situation in the Western Balkans

High Tensions, Dangerous Rhetoric

- ❖ State-building processes in the region – democratization, rule of law, responsible civic education, free and fair elections, fight against corruption, and independence of media – are interconnected with issues of reconciliation.
- ❖ The whole region suffers from captured states and institutions, affecting the judiciary, public administration, elections, and even much of the media. Political leaders lacking accountability and dedication to democratic values in the captured states disproportionately dominate the public space.
- ❖ Corruption has become banal – since everybody is deemed corrupt, nobody is corrupt; clientelism has become the norm; institutions suffer from lack of trust; and nationalist rhetoric is being used to avoid dealing with the past and distract from corruption issues.
- ❖ “Stabilitocracy” has become the term to describe the political scene in the region.
- ❖ Russian and other illiberal influences are growing in strength and – since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine – are becoming more dangerous throughout the Balkans.
- ❖ Some media are part of the problem, spreading misinformation, hate speech and Russian propaganda; thus media become “weaponized” or exercise self-censorship due to their ownership linked to the captured states or political players.
- ❖ The judgements of international courts and local war crimes courts are not respected but rather actively ignored or criticized by national leaders; war criminals are glorified; the international presence in war crimes courts ended too early.
- ❖ The EU seems to be appeasing Serbia continuously and there are no consequences for “not choosing the European side”; Serbia and Republika Srpska are not willing to participate in any regional reconciliation processes; and the term “Serbian world” is increasingly used to advocate for dangerous ideas about changing borders of BiH, Montenegro, and Kosovo.
- ❖ Overall, reconciliation has regressed. After some years of progress with RECOM, the support by Western Balkans political leaders has stopped, and reconciliation disappeared from the EU agenda too. The current lack of political will to engage in dialogue has paralyzed opportunities for progress. There are no national nor regional strategies for reconciliation, and the processes connected to reconciliation, as mentioned above, have stalled even though they should have advanced decisively long ago.

Weakening of the EU

- ❖ The EU has become weaker in the Western Balkans, with less focus and less influence; the policies pushed by some EU Member States are fragmented, lack consistency, and are often seen as hypocritical or having double standards.
- ❖ The EU is seen to be more about money and no longer about political process and progress; some in the European countries falsely consider the reconciliation processes as more or less finished and, therefore, no longer a priority – thus the focus has shifted to stability and short-term security.
- ❖ Country Reports have become inconsequential, since it now appears that progress towards accession is not tied to them.
- ❖ Outside of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, which is plagued with a lack of transparency, the EU has become barely visible. The other hotspots seem to be largely ignored.
- ❖ The partisan relationships of EU political groupings with Western Balkans leaders have negative impacts on the democratic development of the region.

“Pandora’s Box” of the Bulgaria-North Macedonia Dispute

- ❖ The situation between North Macedonia and Bulgaria is currently the most problematic issue in the region. Some Bulgaria’s demands are incompatible with European standards.
- ❖ The so-called “resolution” put forward by the French EU Presidency set a dangerous precedent by incorporating counter-productive demands that will further complicate or halt also other accession processes in the region.
- ❖ The credibility of the EU has been damaged by the failure to keep the promised reward of progress in EU integration after the Prespa Agreement, and now the inclusion of bi-lateral nationalist demands in the Negotiation Framework, thus turning those demands into a collective position of EU Member States.
- ❖ A country imposing national narratives over another one can increase tensions, prevent open, objective and informed historical debate, hindering peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts.
- ❖ The resulting negative geopolitical consequences for the Western Balkans are deeply worrying.

B. Promoting Reconciliation – Revival of Principles

- ☆ Stability and security are impossible without reconciliation, and progress on reconciliation can only be achieved by active engagement of leaders from Western Balkans countries with political support and pressure from EU institutions and Member States; therefore, reconciliation needs to become again a constant and topmost priority for leaders in the region and in the EU.
- ☆ For that, national politicians in the Western Balkans should actively and openly support initiatives on Dealing with the Past, as well as peacebuilding, transitional justice and prosecution of war crimes.
- ☆ The EU needs to make clear that it has an agenda of change; the European integration process of the region is crucial and reconciliation should be included as part of it; appeasement must give way to adapted and upgraded conditionality; the EU needs to push not only technical

aspects of the EU acquis but also promote European values through the accession process (just like among its own Member States).

- ☆ The EU can mediate reconciliation using conditionality in the context of EU integration; this mediation should be carried in accordance with international and European standards, taking advantage of European and international expertise (including with partner international governmental and non-governmental organisations, deploying of experts).
- ☆ A certain Normative Framework of European and International Standards and Values should be developed and become an indispensable element in the accession process – principles and values need to come above stability and short-term practicality.
- ☆ National leaders should re-examine and understand the importance of remembrance policies, also setting clear standards for memorialization and civic education; a European Peace Museum (an international forward-looking project with high symbolism, located symbolically e.g. at the borderline between Sarajevo and East Sarajevo) could bring added value.
- ☆ Western Balkans leaders need to push for a re-think of national narratives; currently, some leaders are using constant accusations of victimisation by others for manipulating their constituencies.

C. Necessary Change of Approach – Longer, Wider, Deeper

- The leaders of the Western Balkans countries and of the EU need to actively support justice, principles, and democratization over stability.
- The EU needs to increase attention and engagement towards hotspots of tensions; design a long-term strategy for reconciliation and regional dialogue using a staged approach; and ensure that dialogues are inclusive, including civil society through parallel or alternative pathways.
- A comprehensive regional “whole-of-Balkans approach” is needed, combining top-down support from international stakeholders and bottom-up activities of civil society organisations.
- Approaches to democratization and rule of law should be enhanced, taking advantage of improved monitoring and assessment mechanisms, including to ensure political accountability; elections need to be properly evaluated by longer-term monitoring that would be able to “name and shame” those political forces that use clientelism, coercion, and bribery to “fix” election results long before election days.
- Progress needs to be rewarded and regression needs to be pointed out clearly; there needs to be more effective monitoring (beyond the politically expedient Country Reports), linked to allocation of EU funds accordingly.
- The “new methodology” of EU integration needs to be used in a positive and stimulating way to streamline the accession processes (rather than freezing them).
- Strategic communication and public diplomacy of the EU in Western Balkans needs to improve, becoming proactive rather than reactive and engaged to promote the EU agenda; counter-narratives are needed against the propaganda of malign players influences; and visibility of the EU financial support should grow.

- The EU needs to be credible in its effort to promote and strengthen European values, it must do so not only in the Western Balkans but also elsewhere, including in EU Member States, given that processes of democratization and rule of law are still unfinished or even regressing in many places.
- The EU and its Members States should recognize that the North Macedonia-Bulgaria dispute is not a “done deal” after the political inter-governmental conference, but is still a hotspot that requires engagement for conflict prevention and mitigation; avoid further tensions by ensuring that Bulgaria no longer will “unduly block the accession process”; clarify European negotiation standards that would avoid the new precedent of neighbours forcing concessions that contradict EU values; promote an EU-sponsored dialogue and facilitation process in both countries between CSOs, academia, and media, together with the inclusion of international experts; explore alternative narratives based on modern historiography and European standards; assist in challenging negative stereotypes in both countries; ensure active monitoring involving also CSOs from both countries for the purposes of early warning and confidence-building.

D. Urgent Measures

- The EU should assist the Balkan countries in overcoming the energy crisis during this winter. The failure to do so can have serious geopolitical consequences.
- Brussels should no longer be passive towards the illiberal influences in the Balkans and needs to actively counter them whether they originate inside or outside the EU; the threat of Russian, Chinese or other malign influences, especially where exercised by their European proxies, should be taken seriously and countered by all political, legal and financial measures available.
- It is crucial to address the issues of war crimes, dealing with the past, and memorialization; political leaders in the region and in the EU need to speak out and act against the glorification of war criminals; war crimes prosecutors and judges should better cooperate across the region; and the EU Victims’ Rights Directive needs to apply to Western Balkans, especially regarding past war crimes.
- With regard to media, their associations need to be supported and professionalized; it is important to open channels of communication and cooperation between investigative journalists and law enforcement investigators and prosecutors; databases on politically exposed persons need to be well-maintained and follow-up actions on that data be encouraged.
- The EU’s appeasement of Serbia is over the top and needs to cease; the webs of corruption need to be cut; Russian agents in Serbia should be expelled; there need to be consequences for the inflow of Russian money in Serbia; and the EU should be more critical of illiberal role/positions of Orthodox churches.
- Kosovo should be recognised by all EU Member States, and attain visa liberalisation.

Rule of Law, Corruption

- The EU needs to engage deeper in the implementation of reforms and design improved accountability mechanisms; judicial responses to evidence of corruption must be stronger and unbiased, since currently, the judiciary too often turns a blind eye to many situations appropriate for criminal investigation.
- The EU should explore the benefits of supporting judicial vetting in the region
- The judiciaries must have reliable accountability mechanisms to ensure their true independence and free them from clientelism.
- Throughout the region, corrupt politicians and governmental officials should be blacklisted with the use of norms and principles inspired by the US Magnitsky Act.

Education

- Civic education, including about contemporary history and peace, needs greater support from the EU, also financially on a permanent basis; education curricula should change because short-term non-formal interventions are insufficient; a whole-of-society approach is needed to promote proper civic education (and active citizenship by extension).
- Explore new narratives and ways to approach peacebuilding and reconciliation through education recognizing that dealing with the past and peacebuilding are essential to reconciliation; this also requires effective prosecutions of past war crimes.
- Facts established by international legal mechanisms cannot be denied or contested via differing narratives.
- UNESCO standards on teaching history are to be promoted.
- The use of positive stories in education should be further explored and maximised.

Support to Civil Society

- The EU and other donors need to change their way of supporting CSOs in the region, since the EU's own reports have shown shortcomings.
- Donors should support sustained long-term (e.g. 10 years) programs and projects without sudden changes in priorities, since short-term project-based activities do not have lasting impact (donors shift priorities quickly and CSOs do not have enough time to foster alliances and partners).
- CSOs should not have to compete against inter-governmental organizations for funding.
- EU funding limitations should be changed to allow CSOs in countries inside and outside the EU to work together using a common cross-border funding mechanisms.
- Regional CSO initiatives for reconciliation in all of the ex-Yugoslav countries, including those already in the EU, should be supported.
- Civil society organisations in the region need easier and systematic access to European institutions to better inform EU support policies, including more stable funding for their reconciliation work.
- A regional bloc of likeminded CSO actors could be established.