



Summary

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oiiip Österreichisches Institut
für Internationale Politik
Austrian Institute for
International Affairs

Conference



BEYOND EMIGRATION, TOWARDS ALTERNATIVE HORIZONS: YOUNG GENERATIONS FOR THE NEW BALKANS

Two-Day conference at the International Institute for Peace and House of the European Union in Vienna, Austria

Summary compiled by: Azra Muftić

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WORKSHOP I:

“Beyond Emigration: Education, Circular Migration and other Alternatives”

SAMIR BEHARIC, University of Vienna & Leipzig University

MAXIMILIAN BENNER, Senior Project Manager at the Centre for Social Innovation,
Vienna

ILIR GEDESHI, Center for Economic and Social Studies (CESS), Tirana

SENADA SELO SABIC, Institute for Development and International Relations, Zagreb

ALIDA VRACIC, Populari, Sarajevo

PANEL DISCUSSION:

“European Alternatives for the Western Balkan Youth 2030:
Education, Reconciliation and Social Equality”

Welcome

JÖRG WOJAHN, Representative of the European Commission in Austria

HANNES SWOBODA, President of the International Institute for Peace (IIP), MEP ret.

GERHARD MARCHL, Karl-Renner-Institut, Department for European Politics

Keynote

CHRISTINA KOULOURI, University of Political and Social Sciences, Athens; History
Education Committee of the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast
Europe (CDRSEE), Thessaloniki

Panel

ADI CERIMAGIC, European Stability Initiative

TANJA FAJON, MEP, S&D Group, Slovenia

DONA KOSTURANOVA, Youth Educational Form, Skopje

DAFINA PEĆI, Albanian Youth Forum, Tirana

TARA TEPAVAC, Senior Researcher at the Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA), Belgrade

Moderator

VEDRAN DZIHIC, Senior Researcher at the oip and Lecturer at the University of Vienna

WORKSHOP II:

“(N)ever-ending Reconciliation? Education and Civic Engagement as Precondition for the New Balkans”

DJORDJE BOJOVIC, European Institute at the London School of Economics and Political Sciences

NEVEN BUDAK, University of Zagreb, Department of History

JÜRGEN SCHICK, Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Department for EU Coordination and Multilateral Affairs

HANA SEMANIC, Central European University, Budapest

DANIJEL TADIC, Foundation Max van der Stoep, European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity

VUK VELEBIT, Faculty of Political Sciences, Belgrade

Rationale for the initiative/series: *Young Generations for the new Balkans 2030:*

Towards Alternative Horizons

Caught in a vicious circle between old-fashioned backwards oriented politics and nationalisms on the one hand and the lack of economic, educational and social perspectives on the other, young generations in the Balkans seem to be losing patience and when possible emigrating to the West in search for a better life. UN agencies and experts speak about a massive demographic revolution in Eastern and Southeast Europe that is changing society more than a majority of developments in the past. Meanwhile, democracies in the region are vulnerable and the EU integration process is not delivering fast results. 2018 was frequently described as the “Year of Hope” for EU enlargement and for a better future for the Balkans. The EU Commission presented a new enlargement strategy, only to be followed by the Balkan’s Summit in May 2018. As the EU presidency country of the second half of 2018, Austria worked towards keeping the region a high priority on the EU agenda. Yet, the question remains whether enthusiasm for EU enlargement can be restored. Pressured by the looming democratic and socioeconomic crisis in the Western Balkans as well as the return of a geopolitical power struggle to the region, it is obvious that a new momentum for enlargement and the overall political and socio-economic development of the region is much needed. Societies in the region are in dire need of alternatives and alternative progressive engagement and action.

Our initiative/series *Young Generations for the new Balkans 2030: Towards Alternative Horizons* sets the spotlight on youth, their progressive stances and hopes for the future.

It poses tough questions about the region, educational opportunities and limits, emigration and alternatives, reconciliation, and hopes in relation to the EU, as well as possible illusions. We aim to explore and promote alternatives to the status quo and embark upon the tough road to action needed to make an alternative horizon possible. The project is a common initiative led by European and regional institutes that features stakeholders, activists, and young people from the region and the EU.

We build upon two successful conferences in Vienna from 2018. In the following step, the discussions and results of the Viennese 2018 conferences will be taken to other European capitals, including the Balkans. In the follow-up events and activities hosted in other European cities, young participants from the region will act as ambassadors representing the Western Balkans.

The first event following the conference in Vienna will take place in December 2018 in The Hague (Netherlands). Events and activities to be organized in Paris (February 2019), Bucharest (April 2019), Brussels, and Berlin (October/November 2019) and the Balkans (autumn/winter 2019) will build the cornerstone of the initiatives throughout the next year. The central pillar of the initiative will be the continuous exchange and work with the established and yet open and inclusive network of young people from the region and the EU, which will result in public activities, short impulse papers, op-ed publications, and advocacy.

The two-day conference *Beyond Emigration, Towards Alternative Horizons: Young Generations for the New Balkans* is part of a larger partnership project between European and regional institutes to bring stakeholders, youth activists, and academics from the EU and the Balkan region together in an effort to come up with alternative solutions to the diverse set of political, social, and economic challenges confronting the Western Balkans. As part of the conference, two workshops and a panel discussion were held on November 5 and 6 at the International Institute for Peace and the House of the European Union in Vienna, Austria. Three central themes dissected and discussed during the conference were prospects of reconciliation in the region, the continuance of alarming rates of emigration from the region, and the role of education in curing nationalism and corruption. Participants mentioned potential engines for change such as the formation of new political parties, government-led incentivization programs for the return of diaspora, and the creation of a common historical narrative among Balkan nations. The goal of the conference was to combine perspectives from youth and other ambassadors about alternative solutions that will continue to evolve through the initiative/series *Young Generations for the new Balkans 2030: Towards Alternative Horizons*.

The Importance of Reconciliation

As time passes by in the Western Balkans like everywhere else in the world, numerous war criminals and other complacent individuals are acquitted without facing legal consequences. Often enough they are even heralded as war heroes and placed into positions of power in the new states comprising the Western Balkans, causing the rest of the world to forget the importance of reconciliation in the process of state building in a region post-war and post-genocide. The workshops and panel discussion highlighted the importance of reconciliation in the Western Balkans in education and politics. If the region continues forward ignoring the complexity of reconciliation, its absence can stunt development in the region, the collaboration between countries, EU accession,

and could fail to prevent the potential onset of a future war or another similar engagement as nationalist rhetoric continues to rule mainstream thought.



In the EU's engagement with reconciliation processes in the Western Balkans following the Yugoslav Wars of the 90's, it is important not to propagate forward what the scholarship of Professor Maria Todorova has identified as "Balkanism". The term "Balkanism" is similar to Edward Said's coinage of the term "orientalism" (usually having to do with the Middle East or East in general) in its stereotypical affirmations about Balkan history and current political paradigms. "Balkanism" is the widely held perception of the Balkans as a particularly bloody and unruly place of endemic violence. Such stereotypes are detrimental to Europe's relationship with the region and aid in the dehumanization process of a set of neighboring peoples. The EU integration process of the Western Balkans must however, be inherently intertwined with reconciliation following the Yugoslav Wars and even deeper into the historical timeline, which has not yet happened on both accounts. Participants agreed that a revision of history education in the region is of inadmissible importance and one of the main ways of tackling the challenges of reconciliation by using a bottom – up approach. For example, the Joint History Project (JHP) started in 1999 and led by 100 historians has pushed for the long-term investment in peace building by creating a common historical narrative in the Balkans. If people do not deal with their past, then the present will always be obscure, and the future will be based on these obscurities.

Concurrent with the grassroots approach, student and activists gave examples about how pressure for proper reconciliation among politicians comes from members of society educated about historical facts. For instance, civil society organizations in Serbia have succeeded in changing some of the cultural and historical understandings of the Yugoslav Wars by using art displays or protests to

educate the public. Recently, high levels of historical revisionism about the Milosevic legacy in Serbia has certainly led the country towards claiming an even more nationalistic narrative and continuing to mark many war criminals as war heroes. A few years ago, activists set up an art exhibition featuring artists from Sarajevo engaging with the topic of the siege of Sarajevo. Many Serbian citizens were not aware that there was a siege of the city due to mainstream media reports, public denials by officials, and a lack of education about these events in school. The art exhibition demystified the phrase, which became much more commonly used as a point of reference by citizens in Belgrade and more widely accepted as a historical truth. Changing the culture around topics of war through youth and NGO activism is a long process requiring the engagement of many educatory methods and should be consistent to show results.

A response to emigration and brain drain patterns observed in the Western Balkans

Emigration and brain drain are a hot topic in the Western Balkans as the consequences of an exodus of professionals, intellectuals, and workers is already felt in the region. Statistics shared during the conference about brain drain in recent years were jarring. Among them were that 400 qualified doctors leave Bosnia and Herzegovina every year and there are simply no more qualified cardio surgeons for children in the country. In Serbia, there is a projected loss of approximately \$9 billion in the next two years due to the continuing outflux of IT workers and managers, and in Albania there are parts of the country that have no access to doctors, triggering an even stronger desire not only for professionals to migrate but also those citizens living in smaller towns and lacking access to proper medical care.

Participants concluded that there is no sign that brain drain and emigration from the Western Balkans will end any time soon partly due to the high demand of labor in EU countries and elsewhere and the continuation of corrupt practices by Western Balkan leaders, which has caused a repression of liberties and created unfavorable living conditions for many citizens in each of the respective Western Balkan countries. The Institute for Youth Development (KULT) based in Sarajevo conducted a survey in 2017 that indicated that about 55% of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina were either contemplating the possibility of leaving the country or were already in the process of doing so. Many participants believe that there is simply a lack of political strategy, the political will, and money in the region to appropriately reduce brain drain.



Despite the challenges surrounding brain drain, it was also pointed out by participants that perhaps migration should not be perceived as such a tragedy. Migration has after all been going on for centuries and should be understood as a natural part of human interaction. The key to the discussion could be in devising an answer of how to simultaneously stimulate brain gain in a region suffering from a reduction of its intellectual capacities and dealing with the aftershocks of a large number of citizens departing relative to the total population of each country. Participants also pointed out that there exists a general, romanticized view of EU enlargement and what such an action would mean to each Western Balkan nation; That such an achievement would be a great reward and an answer to the ongoing suffering due to corrupt practices and nationalism. Croatia is a perfect example of how things do not change overnight.

Many ideas about how to reverse brain drain, contribute to brain gain, and hold on to those still living in the Western Balkan nations were also discussed. One idea was that brain drain could be reduced with greater collaborative networks being built between university professors, doctors, and other professionals in the region willing to work in one another's territory and create strong networks. In Ireland, incentives were taken by the government to stimulate brain gain in the country, specifically with an emphasis on attracting a return of the Irish diaspora. The case of Irish returnees and numerous incentivization schemes set up by the state could be in some cases a conceivable framework that could be used by Western Balkan countries.

In the wake of the "refugee crisis", migrants have also passing through the Western Balkans last year, mostly for the purpose of reaching the European Union and Schengen zones. Despite this reality and the desire of some migrants to stay in the Western Balkans, governments have proven to lack a comprehensive migration strategy for accepting or attracting new migrants, which could be a potential brain gain for the region.

Can education fuel reconciliation, fight corruption, and lead to healthier countries?

Policy makers, educators, and researchers highlighted the importance of creating projects related to education to form a healthy Balkan ethos and increase collaboration between countries. As mentioned earlier, joint history projects creating a common historical narrative throughout the region and respecting the objectivity of certain occurrences and facts can influence reconciliation and raise a more historically aware population not so easily swayed by nationalistic and divisive rhetoric spewed by populists. An important example of how citizens are fed state propaganda at an early age was given in the case of Macedonia. The long-standing regime in Macedonia was responsible for handing out children's books specifically tailored to build nationalistic sentiments at a very young age by teaching the story of Alexander the Great. History is taught in most countries of the Western Balkans as a rigid, indisputable timeline of events rather than the complex and multi-dimensional subject that it is. The Macedonian school system as well as the one in Bosnia and Herzegovina for instance, still has segregated schools teaching different versions of history, choosing what aspects to attribute to whichever identity and creating divisions between different segments of the population. Macedonians recently had the opportunity to vote for a name change that would enable the country to make new advancements towards EU integration and development, but generations of nationalistic propaganda have naturally proved themselves difficult to overturn overnight.



A significant problem regarding education, political awareness, and activism is the low level of media literacy shared by citizens who have never learned how to be critical of what they see on the news and how to dissect such information in search of the truth. It was heavily agreed upon by participants

that quality civic education needs to have a space in schools and taught at a young age so that children can begin learning about their democratic duties and that they are the ones in charge of writing the political future for their countries and the broader region. It was concluded that in the Western Balkans, in addition to teaching civic education to a population largely unaware of its rights as citizens in a democratic country, critical thinking as a skill is lacking and its absence impedes on the possibility of social change daily. One of the biggest challenges to the region is that there is a weak link established in the minds of citizens between their personal political engagement and activism and positive results. The citizens do not understand the nature of how political decisions can be changed through democratic involvement because they believe that reforms are made somewhere in an office vis a vis an official document relegated by the European Union, or another superior institution.

Of course, there are examples from the past of civic engagement in the form of protests, which have produced tangible results in the Western Balkans. One example is the Erasmus+ protest in 2013 in Bosnia and Herzegovina that fought to keep the Erasmus+ program available to Bosnian and Herzegovinian students, as well as the 200.000 large protest in Zagreb on education. More recently, students in Jajce, Bosnia and Herzegovina challenged their political representatives in an ongoing battle against the creation of a new segregated high schools in the country. An onslaught of petitions, protests, and international pressure applied in this case on the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina was a huge obstacle to nationalists and eventually halted the creation of more segregated high schools. Protests also led to certain changes in school curriculum with regards to language and history education, while those segregated schools built earlier continued to operate.

Civic engagement is an important tool for creating because although institutional changes made to history textbooks are important, it is not enough. There is scholarly evidence that children do not remember monuments or textbook information as well as they remember and are affected by events such as celebrations or more personal occurrences. The process of political and historical transformation through institutional changes and civic education is an inevitably long-term procedure that requires the involvement of various social and professional groups. In fact, teachers must be retrained in their reproduction of historical narratives and the way that they engage children in history courses for instance.

Many challenges were indicated as being a main concern of citizens living in the Western Balkans including brain drain, corrupt and nationalist leaders, and illiberal tendencies exhibited by leaders. The ultimate conclusion was that reconciliation was a main factor to alleviating some of these

problems, and that bad practices could be faced with a more educated population aware of their civic duties and rights. Numerous institutional as well as grassroots projects could challenge in the future and have already challenged poor political trends in the region and contributed to citizens' exposure to historical events and different perspectives on identity. It is ultimately through education and the combination of these approaches that many political tendencies in the Western Balkans could be changed.