

Event Report

“Western Balkans between Internal Transitions and the European Integration Process”

The CEU **Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS)** and the **Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES)** office in Budapest hosted an international conference on April 24, 2017 entitled “Western Balkans between Internal Transitions and the European Integration Process”. The conference addressed transition processes in the Western Balkans, examined the role of the EU and the urgency for a closer monitoring of the situation in the region.

The Western Balkans is a region where legacies of the past interfere with the present and negatively contribute to the transitional processes of these countries. The region is officially committed to following the EU and NATO path, although it faces many challenges when it comes to meeting the criteria for both memberships. The difficult democratic transition, the lack of political will, and weak political culture delay the process of bringing the region closer to Euro-Atlantic integration. Meanwhile, the recent years in the Western Balkans have been labeled by a deteriorating situation across the region. All the countries face a new crisis of democracy and democratic values (fragile institutions, violation of human rights, freedom of media, fragile civil society). The democratic transition has not delivered on its promises. Such a crisis changes the political landscape of the region resulting in the adaptation of political elites, and seeks for new tools to retain power, and secure the legitimacy in the eyes of the citizens.



In his welcome remarks **Jan Niklas Engels**, Director of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) in Budapest, said the European Union is facing an existential crisis. He strongly highlighted the importance of meetings and exchange of opinions at this event and other forums of similar kind. As most of the panelists after him, Engels expressed his solidarity with the current hardships of Central European University.

Peter Balazs, Director of the Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS), introduced the conference topic by saying that the organizing institution has a deep interest in the Western Balkans as it is crucial for scholars and the EU to keep a strong focus on this region even in the times of internal crises. Professor Balazs summarized the recent past and upcoming challenges of the EU: the opening of negotiations with the UK on the execution of Brexit; the controversial political situation in Turkey since the planned military coup last year and its severe consequences. He also stated that the Western Balkans is important as it connects the EU with Turkey and its problems, and it is clear that the EU has some unfinished business in the region, which is always dangerous.



The **first panel** dealt with the three transitions of the Western Balkans: political, democratic and civil society. It was chaired by **Christina Griessler**, Research Fellow for the Network for Political Communication (netPOL) at the Andrásy University Budapest.



The first panelist **Venera Hajrullahu**, Executive director of the Kosovo Civil Society Foundation, explained that despite numerous challenges for civil society in the region there is a good structure that can help organizations to evolve. According to her, the EU's enlargement policy is a good framework for reforms, and the Thessaloniki agenda was essential for all countries' transitions. The reforms can achieve more success when the EU projects credibility, but nowadays the EU integration process is troubled by internal

crises on many levels that lead to deteriorations in policies and bad communication towards the countries and citizens. She continued by explaining that the key problem the region is currently facing is a lack of vision and strategy from the EU. Moreover, the effectiveness of changes can often be questioned as we are talking about major modifications that are costly and very hard to execute properly. EU's conditionality and leverage have weakened in the region, but majority of the citizens are still in favor of accession. Hajrullahu described civil society as both subject and object of the Europeanization: its operations bring transparency, support better policy making and have an important role when it comes to sustainability. This sector has achieved results, but "they are always at stake", said Hajrullahu. Therefore, the support from citizens is crucial to maintain those achievements. There were serious efforts to connect the EU and reforms to the citizens, but it is still not enough. She also highlighted the importance of the Balkan Civil Society Development Network which was created and has ever since served as an important source of data to feed the political dialogue and programming of IPA support to civil society in these countries. Regarding Kosovo, she said that the civil sector is moving forward to become an actor in policy making, but in a newly-established country there is always a lot to be done. Civil society should encourage inclusive policy making to consult with citizens that can be supported by legal obligations and by the EU.

Hana Semanic, Research Fellow at the Centre for European Neighborhood Studies, focused her presentation on Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) concentrating on the challenges and obstacles which affect the country's internal politics and limit its advancement towards Brussels. Some of those are: the constant absence of political will among the political elites who continually fail to act in the interests of all citizens of BiH as their priority is usually placed on nationalism and personal interests rather than on the citizens' well-being; the current economic situation which goes hand in hand with endemic unemployment and brain



drain. Despite, EU member states have demonstrated their commitment to BiH's eventual EU acceptance shown by political support, visa liberalization reform, pre-accession funds. Semanic underlined that 2015 was extremely important for BiH in terms of EU accession. The Stabilization and Accession Agreement (SAA) came into force in June that year, the European Commission noted that BiH returned to the road of reforms in its annual Progress Report published in November 2015, and the country handed over the application for EU membership in 2016. However, many skeptics believe that, given the current political constellation, the country is not ready to face the challenges it will encounter on the road towards the EU, while moderate optimists trust that 2017 should bring some answers to those doubts and provide answers to the question whether the application will be followed by BiH's fulfilment of all obligations assumed on the path to the EU. Semanic also added that the EU coordination mechanism, adopted on 9 February 2016, needs to become operational and enable BiH to speak with 'one voice' for the membership application to be considered credible. Finally, she expressed criticism emphasizing that the EU still lack a joint vision and consistent strategy for BiH and the Western Balkans in general, apart from some encouraging diplomatic steps like the Berlin Process. Such a joint and strategic approach would aim at promoting and speeding up EU accession in BiH and among other Western Balkans states, and it would also support and facilitate EU enlargement towards the region and offer practical guidelines. The fact that these countries share the same goal of EU accession is a unique opportunity as they are willing to cooperate to achieve that goal.



Damjan Zdravev, a Civil Society Activist and Researcher, analyzed how civil society's participation in public affairs is fundamental for the democratic reforms in Macedonia. He stated that civil society has once again played a great role in the process of transition. Macedonia was expected to join the EU together with Croatia, but many severe political crises took place in the country over the years. Macedonian civil society is to some extent involved in policy making, but organizations are facing walls when

trying to cooperate with official institutions. Zdravev said that very often civil society members become tired of failing in order to impact the legislation, but there are some success stories such as the Student Movement in 2014 which prevented a very harmful law impacting the higher education in the country. Another scandal was revolving around the government wiretapping the opposition and civil society members. The protests following the latter event gave an opportunity for the Macedonian civil society to show its activities and become stronger. However, there were no major changes within the country. Another long-standing problem of the civil sector is financial sustainability as approximately 62% of funding comes from abroad, whereas local funding is present but is faced with difficulties. There are state-funded organizations that are more involved in supporting government's policies (e.g. the Statues of Skopje). With the cumbersome communication with the government, civil organizations are even more dependent on foreign support. Moreover, the vibrant civil society is faced with a disappointed population as 8 out of 10 persons feel as if they are not influencing decision-making, which "is very dangerous," emphasized Zdravev. Moreover, a better implementation of laws, modifications in the system of funding and crucial developments in democratic traditions and culture are essential for the country. Much can be achieved through regional

cooperation, too. Zdravec closed his presentation by reminding the audience that the civil sector is in the hardest situation in the last 15 years.

Speakers in the second panel, “Is the EU Sleeping in the Western Balkans? Need for a Comprehensive Strategic Approach,” gave a comparative and case country perspectives on the topic offering practical policy solutions. The panel was chaired by Sanja Tepavcevic, GTFP teaching fellow at Budapest Business University.

Ivana Radic Milosavljevic, Teaching Assistant in European Studies at the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Political Science, focused her presentation on the idea that the EU enlargement crisis reflected in both the enlargement fatigue and accession fatigue could be resolved by establishing a flexible membership. She highlighted that the high level of EU involvement and intervention in internal structures of the Western Balkans meet difficulties as it was unprecedented earlier



and the development of new criteria were unclear. Radic Milosavljevic underlined that the slowness of negotiation processes is a clear sign of the enlargement fatigue which shows that the EU wants to sort out its internal problems before the next round of enlargement. According to her, democracy is backsliding in the Western Balkans and very often the political agenda prioritizes stability over democracy. Nowadays, it is not the EU but civil society that fights for democracy in the region. She reminded that EU’s support is missing and so is the public support for EU integration, even among young people (around 40% of those in favor of EU integration). When it comes to Serbia, the country only opened six chapters since January 2014 and there are challenges posed both by Serbia and EU member states. Serbia has a very uncritical and immature relation towards the accession process as there was no political decision on it based neither on serious cost and benefit analysis nor on referendum. Moreover, the country faces many economic and unemployment issues in addition to the series of protests against the current government. Radic Milosavljevic concluded by suggesting a more flexible approach from both sides and a possibility to propose a new kind of cooperation as an alternative to the full EU membership.



Jovana Marovic, Executive Director of Politikon Network from Montenegro, discussed how all the Western Balkan states are burdened by various problems ranging from the lack of media freedom, poor preconditions for holding free and fair elections to the frequent abuse of political power. She drew attention to the fact that accession is not guaranteeing democracy in the Western Balkans, as democracy in the region is backsliding in the last ten years, which is clearly visible when it comes to the

freedom of press and civil society. By supporting political elites in the Western Balkans, the

EU indirectly helps further deterioration of democracy, as political elites are not engaged in executing the proposed reforms. For instance, the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with Montenegro was signed in 2007, the country is already negotiating accession and there have been many improvements in legislation, but these achievements are not visible on the ground. The lack of transparency is another long-standing issue in the country that cannot be solved only by the EU. Marovic warned that there could be serious consequences if EU's attention is further shifted from the region. The EU provides a good framework, but only 7% of the civil society recommendations are implemented. The European Commission is not interested in those recommendations, "they are interested only in the harmonization of laws with the EU acquis, but not what civil society has to say about these laws," said Marovic. She concluded her contribution by suggestion that civil society needs more support from the EU to develop itself and the country, as there are only several civil society organizations that can effectively influence policy-making.

Illir Kalemaj, Assistant Professor of International Relations, Political Science and European Studies at the University of New York in Tirana, presented the case of Albania in both internal and external dimensions as it stands now and in the near future through the example of "Justice Reform". He also stated that it is difficult to represent the EU in the Western Balkans at the time when the integration process is preoccupied with its internal affairs and elections. Albania got its candidate status in 2014;



however, no chapters were opened so far. In the international sphere, the country is more dependent on Washington or Berlin, while the influence of Brussels has weakened due to the lack of vision and since the political elites push for "stabilocracy" – preference for stability rather than maintaining democratic standards. Kalemaj further highlighted that a good legal framework that exists, in theory, does not work well in practice. He argued that reforms in the political system never entirely worked in Albania as fair and free elections were always problematic in the country since 1992. The main challenge in Albania is not the ethnic struggle, but the high level of political antagonism that keeps the country in a stalemate. Moreover, there is an institutional deadlock, problems with the media freedom and the economic situation are very unstable since there is not much industry left in the country. In addition, Albania is located on the route that refugees and other migrants used to get to the EU. Frequently economic migrants are mixed with the flow of refugees, especially from Albania and Kosovo. Illegal drugs trade and organized crime are also a serious threat to the public security. Kalemaj at the end of his speech strongly suggested that stability should not come at the price of democracy. At the same time, Brussels should be more credible, should impose more effective conditionality on the local elites. The bottom line is that the young people cannot bring change in the existing challenging society.

In his closing remarks, **Peter Balazs** emphasized that the EU has plenty of unfinished business in the Western Balkans and that the Union cannot afford to have an inward-looking approach to the region. One of the ways to accelerate the accession process is to have a common advocacy strategy for the region and to speed up the ongoing negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro. The main problem is that the negotiations take place on a very technical level and only with a

very strong shared political will the process will be finalized. Balazs further warned about the exaggerated interference of the EU into the region. It is partially there because apart from the EU these countries need state-building and systemic transition in parallel with the EU accession process. "It is needed, but sometimes it goes too far," he said. Another option is the idea of affiliation: taking all of the Western Balkans states in the EU and letting them grow within. "In the EU everything is possible if there is a unified will of the member states; problems usually occur on the level of basic treaties," Balazs stated. He concluded by saying that the EU's focus is somewhere else at the moment and that the entire accession mechanism is working routinely, but is not motivated.