

Anetrec – Academic Network Supporting the EU Policy Towards the Western Balkans

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The systematic integration of Western Balkans countries² into the EU is the most important if not the only tool for their social and economic progress and for improving stability and security of this region and Europe as a whole. Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia had as a part of ex-Yugoslavia a long tradition of cooperating with the European Community, since the adoption of the Declaration on the relations between SFR Yugoslavia and the EEC in 1967.³ In the same time has been Albania an isolated authoritarian country. The Western Balkans region is today an island in the EU space encircled by EU members – Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Italy on the other side of Adriatic.

Unfortunately, the road of these countries towards European integration and system of values has proven to be more burdensome and lengthier than many had hoped a few years ago. The EU council has in 2003 declared in Thessaloniki the “unequivocal support to the European perspective of the western Balkan countries”. In addition, the Council announced, “the future of the Balkans is within the European union. The ongoing enlargement and the signing of the Treaty of Athens in April 2003 inspire and encourage the countries of the Western Balkans to follow the same successful path. Preparation for integration into European structures and ultimate membership into the European

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2 Albania, Serbia, Montenegro and Northern Macedonia are the candidate states while Bosnia and Hercegovina and Kosovo the potential candidates. Some figures for the region: population 19,9 mio, surface 218,750 km², total GDP 94,2 billion Euro.

3 In 1968, the Permanent Mission of the SFRY to the EEC has been opened. In 1980 was signed a Cooperation Agreement between the European Community and Yugoslavia. It contained provisions concerning trade, financial aid and cooperation in the areas of industry, science and technology, energy, agriculture, transport, the environment and tourism. By 1980 European Investment Bank granted two loans in total value of 50 million of ECUs to link the Yugoslav high-voltage electricity distribution network to the Greek and Italian grids and for the construction of part of the trans-Yugoslav road.

Union, through adoption of European standards, is now the big challenge ahead. Moving towards European Integration' represents a new important step in the privileged relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans. We will consider its content as our shared agenda, and we all commit to its implementation. The countries of the region will focus their efforts on meeting the recommendations this agenda refers to."⁴

Since then, has the EU adopted many "strategic" and "operational" documents, "progressive reports" and the similar in order to find a way forward.⁵ Besides, interesting were the initiatives of Germany and France.

The Berlin Process is a German-led European initiative, whose goal is to facilitate regional cooperation between the Western Balkans six countries with a view to help them fulfil criteria to join the European Union. German Chancellor Angela Merkel launched this initiative in 2014. Its most important component is the so-called "Connectivity Agenda", which first aimed is to link the Western Balkan in the fields of transport and energy; it was later expanded into youth exchanges and economic connections.⁶

On 30 April 2019, the Office of President of France Emmanuel Macron published the "French Strategy for the Western Balkans." The strategy lists three measures: 1) French intensification of the relations with the region in general, 2) the strengthening of bilateral cooperation with the countries of the region in economy, security, justice and defence and 3) the intensification of exchanges with the countries of the region in terms of political-strategic dialogues concerning defence. The strategy put forward also challenges, as are unresolved disputes, various economic and social issues, difficulties in permanently establishing the rule of law, security issues and external influences that divert the region from its European vocation.

As to the EU Commission is maybe the most promising document its "new strategy" towards the Western Balkans adopted on 6th of February 2018 in which it resumed among other the responsibility to

4 EU-Western Balkans Summit, Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003. 10229/03 (Presse 163)

5 In illustration: In 1999, the EU launched the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), a framework for relations between the EU and countries in the region, and the Stability Pact, a broader initiative involving all key international players. The Stability Pact was replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council in 2008. The 'European perspective' was reaffirmed in the Commission's February 2018 Western Balkans Strategy and in the declarations following successive EU-Western Balkans Summits.

6 The Berlin Process <https://berlinprocess.info>.

develop six initiatives aimed at supporting the reforms in the WB6 countries. The Annex to this instrument contains a timetable for the announced actions, including the supervision of their realization. Almost all actions had been allocated until 2019 when ended the mandate of the than incumbent Commission.⁷

However, after 28 years of “realising” the EU enlargement policy has the EU even retreated its support? In the declaration adopted at the EU-Western Balkans summit held in Brdo, Slovenia on 6th October 2021 only “reaffirms its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans and welcomes the commitment of the Western Balkans partners to the European perspective, which is in our mutual strategic interest and remains our shared strategic choice”. All other points of the declaration refer to the “obligations” of the Western Balkans countries.⁸

The Western Balkans countries have with the support of EU and other foreign factors⁹ made significant efforts for ensuring peace, transition reforms and regional cooperation. Nevertheless, the region is still rifted with unresolved war crimes problems, with corruption, deficient judiciary, weakness in the rule of law, with the lack of cooperation, with suspicious political and media discourses, with opened border and other problems, with mistrust, animosities, hate speech, with cleavages and hatred between people (mostly on the ethnic and religious basis). Sadly, the younger generation is immigrating, mainly to EU member states, at alarming rates and these are likely to increase even further, thus seriously harming the potential for innovation progress of the region.¹⁰

The “supervision” of international community, has “limited” the sovereignty of Kosovo and Bosnia and Hercegovina. United Nations Resolution 1244 authorized the deployment of military forces, KFOR, to Kosovo and the establishment of a civilian administration, UNMIK. The Kosovo Force (KFOR) is a NATO-led international peacekeeping force in Kosovo. The purpose of the High Representative for Bosnia

7 European parliamentary research service, Western Balkans enlargement strategy 2018. <https://epthinktank.eu/2018/03/14/western-balkans-enlargement-strategy-2018/> Accessed on 19.12.2021.

8 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/52280/brdo-declaration-6-october-2021-en.pdf>

9 As to the investments and financing of the countries in the region see: The European investment bank in the Western Balkans. https://www.eib.org/attachments/country/the_eib_in_the_western_balkans_en.pdf

10 Retaining its most valuable resource? Western Balkan countries lose up to 2.46 billion eur annually due to youth emigration. WFD, London: August 31, 2021. <https://www.wfd.org/2021/08/31/retaining-its-most-valuable-resource-western-balkan-countries-lose-up-to-2-46-billion-eur-annually-due-to-youth-emigration/>. Accessed on 19.12.2021.

and Hercegovina together with the Office of the High Representative (OHR) established in 1995 is to oversee the civilian implementation of the Dayton agreement. They also serve to represent the countries involved in the implementation of the Dayton Agreement through the Peace Implementation Council (PIC).¹¹ The Principal Deputy High Representative (so far always American) serves as International Supervisor for Brčko, representing the international community in the Brčko District. Some authors had compared the position of High Representative to that of a viceroy, due to its vast powers over Bosnian politics and essential veto powers.¹²

Taking into account the above-mentioned circumstances, the ISCOMET Institute from Maribor, Slovenia, has prepared a proposal of the academic network, which program is supporting the EU policy towards Western Balkans with emphasis on regional cooperation based on reconciliation – ANETREC. The European Commission (Erasmus + programme) has entrusted a consortium of 8 universities and 2 research institutions from Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia, the execution of that 4-year project (2019-2023).¹³ The project brought together more than 80 professors and researchers from previously mentioned countries. They work for the project with enthusiasm, as the modest funds of the project do not allow us to enumerate appropriate their cooperation. The ANETREC project is currently the only project, which combines in a common programme such high number of universities and individuals from Western Balkans, Slovenia and Croatia.

The main goal of the ANETREC project is the academic support to the process of implementation of EU policies towards Western Balkans with emphasis on regional cooperation based on reconciliation as a prerequisite for peace, stability and general development in the region.

There are five sets of main goals of the ANETREC project – some of them were already realised – as follows.

11 The PIC comprises 55 countries and agencies that support the peace process in many different ways – by assisting it financially, providing troops for SFOR, or directly running operations in Bosnia and Hercegovina. There is also a fluctuating number of observers

12 Incumbent High Representative is since 1 August 2021 Christian Schmidt from Germany.

13 ISCOMET – Institute for Ethnic and Regional Studies, Maribor (project leader and coordinator); Faculty of Law, University of Tirana; Faculty of Political Science, University of Sarajevo; Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb; Faculty of Law, University of Prishtina; Faculty of Political Science, University of Montenegro; Faculty of Law, University St Kliment Ohridski Bitola; Faculty of Law, University of Belgrade; Institute for Social Sciences, Belgrade. In addition, associate members: Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Belgrade; Faculty of Philosophy, University of East Sarajevo; Faculty of Law, University of Maribor.

Firstly, the development of a common teaching program, which consists of six inter-linked subjects:

- 1) Different aspects of EU policies towards Western Balkans with emphasis on the specific nature of each of the countries,
- 2) Theoretical and practical aspects of reconciliation as a prerequisite for peace, stability and development of cooperation in the region,
- 3) The concept of multiculturalism in theory and practice of the Western Balkans,
- 4) Human rights and elimination of all forms of discrimination as the basis for a democratic management of relationships within societies of the Western Balkans,
- 5) The role of religion in developing tolerance, mutual respect and the reconciliation process in Western Balkans,
- 6) The problem of migrations in Western Balkans in the context of the EU relationship towards these problems.

To realize this curriculum, the ANETREC management recorded 82 lectures of 45 professors from all participating universities. These lectures will be held in the ANETREC data base hosted by the ISCOMET Institute in Maribor, and will be from the summer semester of the 2021/22 academic year onward available to use them for online lectures at the participating universities. The subjects will be held independently or as part of existing study programmes. Universities will also have the option to accredit the curriculum as a whole.

The ANETREC project partners do hope that the realisation of this program in the education will have a long-term positive impact on spreading the spirit of reconciliation, tolerance and cooperation among the countries of Western Balkans, Slovenia and Croatia.

Besides, after the ANETREC project ends, the study materials gathered represents a good basis for future development of different forms of common studies and research programmes in the Western Balkans. More than 80 especially young professors and researchers who were indirectly involved in the ANETREC project expressed their willingness to participate in the proposed or similar topics in both education and research. The EU should firmly support these common endeavours!

Secondly, as an encouragement for student research of different aspects of EU policies towards Western Balkans, the problems of these

countries in relationship with the EU and the relevant state of affairs in their societies, we carried out a public call to students to write essays on these questions.

A panel of professors from the ANETREC partner universities chose 42 of the best-evaluated essays, which will be published in a special ANETREC publication. The management of the project will invite the authors of the awarded essays to the ANETREC summer school that will be held in July 2022 in North Macedonia. This will be a unique gathering of students from all the Western Balkans countries, Slovenia and Croatia.

Under the guidance of professors, they will organize debates on the content of their essays and other topics regarding EU policy towards Western Balkans and “open issues” on their countries way along the European integration.

The lectures by 10 professors from the EU and Western Balkans will enlarge their knowledge about the mentioned topics and stimulate their personal views on issues that are of paramount importance for the process of European integration and development of their countries and the region as a whole. In this context will be interesting also the exchange of experiences with students from two EU members - Slovenia and Croatia.

Thirdly, in addition to development of study programmes, the ANETREC project also gives attention to two political questions:

- 1) In Bosnia and Herzegovina, we are preparing an analysis of segregation in the educational system with suggestions for gradual improvement of current state of affairs, which is deepening the ethnic and religious cracks in their society.
- 2) A team of professors from Prishtina and Beograd, alongside with other colleagues from the project, is preparing a possible academic program of common actions and cooperation between academics and students of both countries, in order to contribute to the creation of positive atmosphere for searching solutions for a gradual, long-term normalization of relationships between the two countries.

The results of both researches will be debated at the Summer School and on specially organized meetings as well.

Fourth, the long-term goal of the ANETREC project is to prepare a proposal to establish an EU reference centre for Western Balkans issues, which would offer the EU structure informational support in dealing with the Western Balkans issues and would serve as an educational, research and meeting centre for those dealing with the European integration challenges of this region. The success in realizing this proposal is of course dependant on the engagement of the government of the country that would wish to host such a reference centre.

Fifth, the concluding international conference, which will be held in Maribor in 2023, will be an opportunity to not only present and discuss the project's results but to offer a deeper evaluation of the EU policies towards the Western Balkans and to elaborate suggestions for searching solutions of existing problems.