



YOUTH COOPERATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS 2020

The results of the US president elections in 2016 made strong effect on the global political scene and had significant impact on elections throughout Europe. The transfer of its effects was already evident in the 2017 elections held in France, Germany, Netherlands and Hungary. The fear of EU citizens in regards to the capacity of EU institutions in defending their interests, as it was evident during negotiations on Canada Agreement, increased over time. Far right parties are in power in most of the European countries in 2020.

The new political establishment used the momentum to emphasise the weaknesses of the EU that became evident during financial crisis and more prominently during the refugee crisis. Despite efforts on the side of the EU institutions to preserve its power and outline solidarity as one of the foundations of the EU, its initiatives (such as the quota system for refugees) failed due to the opposition from EU Members States including Italy, France, Germany and Netherlands whose right wing party leaders political pact advocating against the EU is very strong in 2020

On top of that, as UK has left the EU in March 2019 with many concessions gained in the course of negotiations, several EU MS explore their options and possible benefits of leaving the EU. The policies of parties in power continue to raise the anyhow high percentage of citizens in favour of organizing their own referendums (AUXIT, FREXIT, NEXIT). Overall, the EU scepticism is high in EU MS, due to the increased perception that EU has ceased to satisfy its citizens' needs and aspirations.

The rise of the EU scepticism is also evident in the WB with right wing parties mostly in power in 2020. , With EC resources shifting towards issues deriving from the evident EU disintegration, the European Integration process loses its importance and is marked with significant ambiguity. WB countries are faced with even more unclear membership prospects than it was the case in 2016. ,

Still, due to active programmes and initiatives deriving from the Berlin process to which Germany and other EU MS involved stayed dedicated, the WB countries continued and widened their cooperation in the field of transport, energy, youth cooperation and economic development. These processes were further incentivised by the EC with the increase of the availability of EU funds and capacity building which led to the higher percentage of use of the already available IPA Funds. Governments of the countries of the WB also found interest to widen their cooperation in other spheres and new treaties have been signed such as those referring to the ease of the movement in the region including joint customs and border crossing with personal ID. This has contributed to the raise of the trade in the region. Also, mobility of students was increased due to agreement reached on mutual recognition of diplomas.

Despite the move towards disintegration, in the field of security cooperation between EU MS stayed satisfactory and was especially evident in the improved exchange of information between EU intelligence services. The European travel information and authorisation system

has been put in place. These actions resulted in 2017 with increased number of early warned, detected and prevented terrorist attacks. The number of threats however remained serious and it showed rising trend in the case of Croatia in the summer of 2017. This triggered Croatia's urgent response that included stronger involvement of partners from Western Balkan countries in dealing with terrorist threats.

Namely, as prevention and anti-radicalisation measures have already been put in place in WB, the Croatia incentivised WB countries, with the support from other EU MS, to strengthen their efforts in their implementation. Additionally, the regional security Task Force has been put in place in order to allow quick and timely exchange of data and early warning system for security threats, based on the lessons learned from the EU MS in exchange of intelligence data.

The Governments cooperation realized that in order for them to be successful there's a need of joint cooperation to overcome the corruption in the region. For this reason a joint Anti-corruption Institution was created in 2019, that raised the issues of stronger rule of law in WB countries.

The Croatian led initiative built upon the extension of the anti-radicalisation network (RAN) to enlargement countries which was launched by the EC in its 2016 Enlargement Package. While the RAN itself provided valuable trainings and transfer of knowledge from the EU colleagues in dealing with anti-radicalization, the added value of the initiative proved to be the innovative approach toward prevention that involved establishment of the regional IT hub.

The IT hub provided space for young people to develop IT solutions to deal with security threats. In that way, young people and not only those confronted with radicalization, gained access to the platform for increased regional, interethnic and intercultural cooperation and at the same time opened the possibility to commercialize their ideas. This spurred the development of the regional network of young, capable and equipped young professionals with competitive knowledge. By 2019 the IT Hub showed incredible contribution in empowering young people, that the Governments created a regional fund to finance the start up companies and enable young people institutional support to promote their businesses abroad. The initiative had positive effects on controlling the brain drain and opened possibilities for young people to develop competitive advantage in their region and find possibilities for the employment.

New young generations have experienced periods of modification of school curricula and university profiling according to the need of the labour market. Giving the fact that IT technology has been rapidly increased in the region, school curricula specifically developed to ensure more specialized knowledge in different IT sectors and areas. University education programs were concentrated more on equipping students with practical knowledge and skills. Entrepreneurial events and activities were in rise up to 2020, and became an obligatory element in the university syllabuses. This gave opportunity to students to cooperate with the market and practice their acquired knowledge. IT sectors entered in every pore of society, students and young entrepreneurs developed projects including in large the social media networks and software to analyse political and social opinions and human conversations.

Universities in the WB, largely opened to research opportunities provided by the H2020 programme, triggered by the reports and critics made from the European Commission (in the EC Progress Reports) and by the fact that there has been a certain availability of funding which in the past have been rarely used.

Motivated by few H2020 projects, young people in the WB focused on developing new technologies that empower users to make sense of conversations through analysis of human conversations (content, affect and other behavioural traits). They aimed at creating adaptive technology to address the diversity and velocity of the media source. Linguistic patterns and automatically generated human-readable multimedia were the focus of students’ studies. Predicting political events and patterns, in an uncertain time such as the increased EU disintegration, have encouraged WB governments to focus on evaluating technology where it is being used and not only in the lab, but engaged end-users ranging from language data analyst to quality assurance professionals and news media analyst in real task settings. Western European countries such as Germany have lost their popularity as dream destination for IT sector employment, and many emigrants from the WB countries have invested their financial sources to assist the region in the development process.

This lead to adding around 100.000 highly qualified people to the regions’ IT workforce, so well connected and networked to make the WB the most desirable IT sector destination. It contributed to the lowering the overall unemployment rate, by increasing the number of employees from non-IT professions needed to support the work of the IT professionals.

SCENARIO 2 - WAKING UP FROM THE GROUNDHOG DAY	STABILITY IN WB REGION INCREASING INTEGRATION OF EU INCREASING
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Many turbulent events that occurred 4-5 years ago globally and regionally, led, step by step, from a situation of great uncertainties and rise of political populism to a wake up call and a renewed vision of Europe by 2020.

The effects from the 2015-2016 terrorist attacks that occurred in Europe, the peak of the European refugee and migrant crisis in 2015, as well as the outcomes of the Brexit referendum and the US elections in 2016, gave an added impetus to the EU’s motivation to consolidate and reinvent itself, initially internally, but afterwards toward the outside world as well. Namely, the initial growth of anti-establishment political sentiments, emerging political forces in Europe blaming the globalization for the loss of jobs and presenting immigration as a threat to national identity and security gained momentum over the 2017 electoral season in the European Union. However, it was not on a large scale, as it was shown that inflammatory rhetorics and populism do not offer qualitative solutions to the challenges. The slight increase of the pro-EU sentiment among EU citizens was obvious even in the Eurobarometer survey conducted by the European Commission in 2016 post Brexit. At the same time it forced mainstream parties to reinvent themselves and address the challenging socio-economic and political trends. Additionally during that time, the lack of a clear prospect of accession opened up a number of security risks in the WB region, particularly since Russia,

Turkey, China were increasingly competing for economic and often political influence in the countries on the outskirts of the EU. It was concluded that the frustration with the inability to progress in EU accession could easily translate into growing euro-skepticism, or even rise of populism and nationalism in some of the countries in the region.

Thus, though not immediately, the EU also became more proactive towards the Western Balkans. The history has shown, that more integration within the EU, translates into increased enlargement records. Deepening goes hand in hand with widening. The need to demonstrate its relevance and appeal, even or especially in times of crisis, found very suitable realization in the Western Balkans region. Also, the importance of the stability in this region for the EU as well, the established connectivity, investments and progress made in the previous decades, were too high of a stake to be easily gambled. The period known as “enlargement fatigue” slowly but surely gave way to a reinvigorated EU accession process. Increased pace in the EU integration processes proved to be complementary with the increased stability in the WB countries. The WB region itself, regarded in the past as the back door of Europe, became more and more, the front door of the European Union.

One of the outcomes of this revitalized engagement was investing greater efforts in preventing bilateral disputes to be misused as a blockade on the accession path of some countries to the EU. Progress in this regard was made especially in the area of youth cooperation, thus contributing towards increased trust, future oriented visions and cooperation in other areas as well. As a consequence, the “carrot and stick” approach and the “strict but fair” rule became more meaningful, thus giving further impulses to the domestic reform agenda in many areas.

At the same time, given the complexity of the crisis and challenges that went outside national borders, as it was shown for example during the refugee and migrant crisis, the region itself became increasingly aware of the need for coordinated and synchronized approach and strong regional cooperation, especially in the prevention and disaster relief, but security too.

This spirit was also stimulated in the framework of the Berlin process initiated by Germany in 2014, whereby various projects further strengthened the cooperation on the issues concerning infrastructural and economic development, as well as energy connectivity.

In the years leading to 2020, greater synergy and agreement on the 'rules of the game' between China and the EU was achieved regarding the One Belt One Road program, including joint projects in third countries. This gave additional injections regarding the development of the infrastructure of the region, increased trade and creation of new jobs, consequently contributing to the regional cooperation in this field, in line with the EU-China Strategic Agenda for Cooperation.

By 2018 all negotiating countries were helped face economic and institutional challenges tied to budget deficits, so the countries could be prepared or try to avoid Excessive Budget Deficit Procedure of the European Commission. To this aim National Economic Reform programs were expanded and all negotiating countries were included in the preventive surveillance of the economic and fiscal policies of the European semester.

Against this background the youth cooperation in the region developed further. Young people were becoming more and more aware that they often share similar challenges across the region. Less burdened by past grievances, more future oriented and tech-savvy, they engaged even more with modern technologies in order to communicate, inform and improve their prospects. Thus the young generation across the region was becoming increasingly engaging and active, creating a push for further reforms and investments aimed at improved education and vocational training, increased mobility, exchange, cooperation and innovation. The Estonian and Finish models were taken as examples when it came to efforts aimed at achieving higher PISA ranking. One of the palpable results in this field was the increased mutual recognition of diplomas in the region and with the EU.

The Regional Youth Cooperation Office established in 2016 as one of the outcomes of the “Berlin process”, through various exchange programs gave strong impulse to the promotion of the spirit of reconciliation and cooperation between the youth in the region. In parallel, due to the positive results achieved in various projects, especially in the field of education, innovation, culture and sports, the funding increased over time both from the RYCO contracting parties and external donors. The brain drain from the WB region was still occurring, but by 2020 brain circulation and its benefits, sparked by the regional stabilization, started to emerge on a more significant scale. This slowly but surely brought greater entrepreneurial spirit among the societies in the WB region. By 2020 the idea for creating a regional school for startups was fully developed and the initial steps for its establishment were undertaken.

SCENARIO 3 - RELAPSE	INSTABILITY IN WESTERN BALKANS REGION INCREASING DISINTEGRATION OF EU INCREASING
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Global and EU context

Welcome to December 2020. Donald Trump is re-elected as president of the USA. Right-wing populists almost completely disrupted the usual way of doing politics across the EU and in the Western Balkan region. It all started with Brexit and the first election of Trump in 2016, and continued with increased euroscepticist concerns expressed among the EU member states – older and newer ones alike. In the Netherlands and Germany right-wing populists then achieved historically good results and started to heavily influence the agenda of the mainstream political parties. In May 2017, Marine Le Pen was elected as the president of the Republic of France. Negotiations on Brexit proved to be harder than had initially been anticipated, even in the “hard-Brexit” scenario, as populist agendas collided, thus provoking deep divisions between EU members. Economic stagnation continued. The EU in 2020 is increasingly about the quarrels among nation states than about the agenda of further integration. Five years from its start, the refugee crisis is still a relevant challenge for the EU officials fueling continuous divisions. With the new European Commission elected in 2019 the EU enlargement was definitely put on hold – even at the technical level. Mounting pressure on the EU budget to reduce significantly in the 2021-2028 financial perspective led to the

announcement of considerable staff cuts in the European Commission, especially the staff dealing with “low-priority” policies, such as enlargement.

Regional context

The rise of the right-wing populists, re-affirmation of nation states and divisions in the EU boosted similar movements in the Western Balkans, but at a somewhat slower pace. Russians, Chinese, Turks and Arabs filled the void in the Western Balkans left by the increasingly introvert Trump Administration and a preoccupied EU. Macedonian elections in December 2016 ended with no clear winner and a prolonged political crisis. In the 2017 presidential elections in Serbia a clear winner with over 50% already in the first round was Aleksandar Vucic, the reformed former Radical turned pro-European. In his presidential mandate Vucic, feeling legitimized by the decaying situation in the EU, started to increasingly change his pro-European rhetoric, gradually turning his political discourse more populist and nationalistic. Negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina reached a stalemate. Kosovo’s isolation grew. Following a turbulent political conflict and several small-scale terrorist attacks, Republika Srpska entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence after holding a referendum at which a vast majority voted to leave the state. The independence was welcomed by Serbia, Russia, but also – and surprisingly so – the nationalist, anti-Islamic Le Pen’s France. The latter proved yet again that Europe was no longer a predictable continent.

Overall, the economic stagnation continued with occasional regional trade-war episodes. CEFTA and RCC were paralyzed and increasingly abandoned by their traditional donor and partner – the EU, which ceased financing under own financial pressures. The national institutions' failure to truly re-socialize the returnees coming back from the war zones in Syria and Iraq led to a rise in extremism amongst the youth, thus generating terrorist cells across the WB, especially Kosovo, Bosnia and Sandzak in Serbia. Due to fading EU membership perspective politicians in the region increasingly pretended to do reforms, while making populist endeavors instead. The first effects of the global warming, such as frequent floods and increased level of air pollution, have been felt in the region, further damaging the local economies. The Western Balkans remained significantly energy dependent, leaving a room for the external suppliers such as Russia to increase its influence in the region. Being left on the margins of the EU's Energy Union and without any bargaining power, the WB are now facing frequent raising of the energy prices. No policies on transition to renewable energy have been created or implemented.

Being young in the times of global and regional decay

In August 2020 *The New York Times* published a story about several young people from the Western Balkans who obtained a scholarship to spend some time in China. The scholarship enabled them to build connections and understanding for how Chinese companies operate. The size of Chinese investments in the region, together with Turkish and the Gulf state investments, constitute close to two-thirds of all investments in the region. Embracing the jobs created by these investments – basically the only new jobs available, the youth from the WB started to accept the Eastern corporate culture, while moving away from the core European values.

The twenty-something old youngsters winning the scholarship, according to *The New York Times* article, are considered to be among the lucky ones. Most of them end up finding a job working in the growing number of companies that work directly with China. The rest of the young people from the Western Balkans are struggling to find “a way out” from their countries. With almost one third of the native population already emigrated, the WB have begun to feel substantial negative demographic effects.

Once, the region’s hope for better future was a perspective of joining the EU after successfully implementing wide-range of reforms. Over the past several years this hope has faded away. It is attracting investments from China, Turkey and the Gulf states that is the new reality in the Western Balkans and their biggest hope for the better future. Jelena Simić, chairperson of one of the few remaining independent regional policy think tanks based in Belgrade, is quoted in the article saying she doubts that investments alone will significantly improve the quality of life. Simić said that “in order for the countries to make a significant leap forward reforms are needed in a wide-range of areas – from the rule of law and public administration to business environment and education.” But appetite among regional politicians for substantial reforms is almost non-existent. They win their elections repeatedly, through control of media, fake news and Internet restrictions and the staging of spectacular arrests of their political opponents who failed in alleged coup attempts. They win elections on a promise of protecting national interest and fighting terrorism and extremism. Many analysts are talking about the fear of renewed ethnic tensions and even wars. Occasional terrorist attacks show the first negative results of a growing radicalization among the Muslim population in the region.

For the youth, developments in the region and the rest of the world from 2016 to 2020 meant having less and less viable options. Just four years ago it was considered to be normal for many young persons from the region to travel freely to the EU and study, visit or even work there. Following the launch of the refugee integration program, the tightened visa regime and the diminished EU blue card quotas, a touristic or business trip to Vienna or Berlin in 2020 is much more difficult to take. Finding a job there due to increased number of refugees is almost impossible. The budget restrictions in the EU have led to cutting most student exchange programs, driving the WB students to seek other similar opportunities in Russia, China or the Middle East. Due to the small budget allocations and insignificant state investments in science and education, the quality of the educational system in all Western Balkan countries has further deteriorated instead of improved.

According to Simić, it is not only that the links between the EU and the region decreased, but also between the countries in the region. “Regional youth projects, initiatives or even meetings have decreased drastically in the last two years with the RYCO abandoned due to lack of funding only two years after its formal establishment. Majority of young individuals know about each other only through what their politicians and the government-controlled media tell them. And what they are being told is that others are not to be trusted.”

Although increasingly more restricted, the only free channel for youngsters to meet each other and exchange ideas, is the internet. This is how a growing number of youngsters were able to join the growing number of the far-left youth movements. They call themselves the

“21st century Partisans”. They are anti-Western and dominantly anti-globalist, although they embrace many of the Chinese values. In the last six months, they took over responsibility for three small-scale partisan-style attacks against police and military institutions in Montenegro, Bosnia and Macedonia. The region has also seen an increase in cooperation between the youth of populist, right wing and anti-Western political movements and youth organizations with their Russian counterparts. For years, they keep receiving substantial ideological and financial support from Russia. The actual expert analyses of these movements suggest that they are ideologically confused, led by the desire to reject rather than embrace certain values, almost anarchist.

The New York Times article concludes with a story of a 23-years old Montenegrin IT expert. He could not find a decently paid job in Montenegro, so he turned to a Chinese hacking company. In a confused world and even more confusing region, the Western Balkans youth has few options. Demographic decline, escalation of poverty, violations of human rights, energy dependence as well as looming outbreaks of inter-ethnic tensions or outright violence, are the “new” challenges that the youth from the Western Balkans are facing ahead of the 2020 turn of decade.

SCENARIO 4 - LEFT AT THE ALTAR	INSTABILITY IN WB REGION INCREASING EU INTEGRATION
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It has been tough last couple of years. Interesting but tough. Democratic beliefs put on the test, patience and motivation gone, as evidenced by questionnaires in public pools, mostly stuck on the questions why we have landed on this path and when did it happen?

Europe has faced some challenges and as a result EU has closed ranks. After Brexit in 2016 (effectively completed only in first quarter of 2019) and multiple terrorist attacks in Germany in 2015 and 2017, Belgium 2015, France 2016 and Netherlands 2017 rise of conservative option was expected and occurred. After elections in Germany new conservative leader is coming to the lead. Even though there has been the increase of AfD – Alternative for Germany, which is pushing for more nationalistic policies and diametrically opposite of the current course of Germany for more integration. Because of this, CDU is careful in advancing the defense Union, already negotiated with France and other EU partners. Meanwhile, in France, pro EU party wins the election and pushes for even bigger reforms and substantial defense and security Union as a direct response to Le Pen drive for exiting EU. EU Member States from the central and eastern bloc have nevertheless demonstrated important economic vigilance. Paired with this public opinion has been drastically changed and moved to the position towards a deeper Union after the attacks in Germany in 2015 and 2017. This has set the outlook of the federalist reform for the EU stronger than ever and federalization has become the new flagship initiative.

Trump being selected as a President of USA has echoed through EU for some time. His stand on foreign policy drifted from the common goals of the third pillar of the EU (justice and home affairs). On the other hand it gave back some balance in EUR – USD relation after the

Brexit shake. EU had to deal with a significant number of refugees and their inclusion in the society. Negotiations on both Free Trade Agreements: EU-USA and EU-Canada did not progress as expected, having in mind that USA and Canada dedicated themselves rather to the reinvigorating the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) and negotiations with Britain which is soon to become NAFTA associate member. With too many things in their plates, EU membership negotiations and acceptance of more countries from the Western Balkans has been stalled.

Countries in the region have taken similar path. Democratically chosen leaders have executed more of an authoritarian way of leading. Since there has been not that much of an improvement on EU integration path, region has found more partners in China, Russia, Turkey and Middle East. EU funds have been limitedly available and less desirable requiring expanded bureaucratic apparatus which beneficiary countries cannot afford so countries have found themselves taking more and more loans from WB and other sources (such as Middle Eastern). Likewise, provenance of the FDIs and concession arrangements for heavy industry and infrastructure is almost exclusively with the non-EU partners, which directly leading to increased pollution, higher number of death caused by low air quality.

Mobility of people have been limited, visas have been required for all those who wish to work in the EU, quotas have been set, limiting number of people who can work for a certain period in the EU. As a consequence, young people are stuck in the region, without the possibility to go out, becoming even more frustrated. Huge unemployment which will lead directly to increased radicalisation of the youth. A lot of young people want to leave the WB.

Conflicts of the past decades have brought with them different forms of prejudice and intolerance, while its aftereffects have continued to be underlined by a lack of opportunities for youth resulting in massive youth unemployment figures and heavy brain drain across the region. Young people lives have become more complicated and fragmented. That's the reason why the establishment of the Regional Youth Exchange Office (RYCO) was just necessary.

Number of NEET – young people who are neither employed, in education or in training has been constantly rising. Unfortunately, it has been the same with the number of homeless persons. Deteriorating economic position has been hard on Millennials. With low loan accessibility and their favorability, most of youth is still living with their parents, even when their own kids are on the agenda and creating their own family. Most of the countries of the region have redefined their Youth Strategies so that the age range of persons categorized as “youth” is 15-35 (instead of previous 15-30 average).

Labor market transition for young people in the region did not happen. So some of them have adapted themselves to the market, this time it was the world market. Number of freelancers has been rising each year for astonishing 70%. On the other hand it is hard for the State to control young entrepreneurs and collect taxes on all of their profits, therefore grey economy has been omnipresent.

For others, unemployment has been usually situation they have found themselves in. Not being able to work under the diplomas they have attained, accepting jobs in services or low quality jobs. These groups can be easily found on front rows of radical movements. At fore

front asking for a change. Social inequalities are beginning to build a wall between young people and there is a need for integrative approach in creating and implementing policies in the region.

Though effective, it is neither systematic nor durable. Without state support it has no legal base and its possibilities for grow is limited. Stimulation for this kind of cooperation is limited, once the demand for certain issue is gone, so will be its existence. Key policies for young people, such as employment, housing and health are still underdeveloped.