

EU and Western Balkan states (WB6) – Slovenian
Presidency of the Council of the European Union

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10:30 **Welcome and Introduction**

Holger Haibach

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Gordan Akrap, PhD

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10.35 **Keynote Speaker**

Gordan Akrap, PhD

Hybrid Warfare Research Institute

10.30 **Discussion**

Holger Haibach

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Stribor Kikerec

Director of the Directorate for Southeast Europe and EU

Enlargement Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Croatia,
ambassador

Iztok Mirošić

Director of „Bled Strategic Forum“ program, Ministry of foreign affairs
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Hosts:

Marko Prusina

Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Zagreb

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Holger Haibach

Good morning everyone and welcome. Unfortunately, I cannot be with you in person as I am now in Berlin for the Annual Konrad Adenauer Directors' Conference for Europe and North America. I am also very sorry not to be able to be with you throughout the whole Conference, since I have other commitments here in Berlin. I am very happy that we are able to organize this Conference together with our friends from the Hybrid Warfare Research Institute, and thank you Gordan for that. This is one of a series of conferences that we are organizing on the topic of the relations of the EU and the so-called Western Balkans 6. I would also like very much to thank our participants from Slovenia to have made themselves available. We all know that the Slovenian presidency of the EU is just around the corner and the politics of the Western Balkans will be one of the focal points of the Slovenian presidency, just as it has been in the German presidency and in the Croatian presidency before that. So, I think that there is a nice continuation here and that it is high time to discuss all of that, especially in the light of all these non-papers flying around, wherever they come from. Also, we just had the summit of the WB 6 and the heads of states of Croatia and Slovenia taking place at Bled where you could hear a certain, perhaps not disappointment, but surely a lack of enthusiasm on the part of many of the states aspiring to become members of the EU. To put it simply, they are not really happy with the situation as it is. On the other hand, the European Union also has its inner struggles. Sometimes it seems that the EU 27 are not really on the same wavelength as far as the enlargement policy is concerned. There are other problems that need to be tackled too, and I am pretty sure that all of these things will be addressed and am very happy that we have these highly ranked speakers who can inform us of their views. Especially interesting will be to hear the Slovenian perspective of

how these things are going. From the German side, I can say that we just yesterday had some talks with leading politicians as far as European Union matters are concerned. Germany still stands behind the EU enlargement policy of the Western Balkans, provided the states who aspire to become members fulfil the set criteria. And I think that finally starting the talks with North Macedonia and Albania would serve as a very strong sign that the EU is still committed to keep its promises as far as the WB region is concerned. Having said that, I give back the word to the TV studio and wish you all a fruitful Conference. Thank you.

Marko Prusina

Mr Haibach, thank you for your welcome address and the introduction into this Conference. Now we give the floor to Mr Akrap, who will open the today's Conference with an introductory speech.

Gordan Akrap

Thank you, Marko and all the others for being with us today. Welcome to another WB6 Conference, which we believe is important not only for the enlargement issue in this region, but for the whole of the European Union as well.

The six countries of the Western Balkans, known as WB6, have been, are and will be, to a certain extent and in a certain way, a source of numerous insecurities, crises, challenges and frictions. Numerous open, and unfortunately still unresolved social, political, national, economic, security issues stand in the way of establishing and implementing successful and just solutions in order to create self-sustaining democratic societies and states.

The results of the Croatian Presidency of the EU Council in 2020, which were visible regardless of the pandemic and the earthquake in Zagreb, as well as the results of many years of developments known as Brdo-Brijuni Process and the Berlin Process, have shown that democratization and stabilization of WB6 should be among the priorities of the EU. We have also seen that there exists a minimum level of common interest on which the pro-European future of these societies and states can and should be built. This was also evident from the five conferences we held last year.

No solution that seeks to repeat the organizational, political and social models that existed in the time of the SFRY can be the foundation on which to build a successful future. It is difficult to apply a mathematical rule where the product of two minuses gives a positive result to social processes. A new mistake can hardly correct a previous mistake.

The Presidency of the Council of the EU will soon be taken over by the Republic of Slovenia. Even before this occurs, the country faced a challenge that threatened Slovenia's objectivity, credibility and action. The so-called "Slovenian non-paper" has stirred up political and social processes and relations in some WB6 countries who reacted in a more or less predictable way. However, we are pretty much certain that this non-paper, as well as the next one which appeared, the so-called "German-French paper", is only a product of behind-the-scenes operations aimed at misinforming different audiences, introducing divisions and defamation with regard to the alleged authors of these non-papers. At the same time, they are integrative-radicalizing in relation to the target audiences within the national communities of probable authors. In other words, these are documents targeted at the international and domestic public in order to try to stop the process of understanding the real situation and social

and inter-state relations in WB6 and the processes that must necessarily take place.

The Croatian non-paper, the only real such document, is one of the possible fruitful steps in the above direction. The togetherness shown by the EU in helping WB6 cope with the pandemic and resolving a number of outstanding issues remains clear to these countries as well. They should not be discouraged on the road to the EU. EU membership implies an acceptance of the principles of a modern and sustainable society which is open to diversity, which communicates openly on all the outstanding issues, where, as a rule, the power of arguments is used in negotiations and dialogue rather than the argument of power. We must admit that, even within the EU, there are segments of society which are exclusive, which try to impose their own views by force. However, Europe is a community of different peoples who have found a common interest in its system of values. It is a process of development which is permanent in its very nature and it should always, in a democratic manner, be adapted to new realities.

To this end, we have launched these conferences: on the one hand, we are trying to reach a minimum common system of values and connections at the national and interstate level; we try to identify and shed light on key challenges and try to come up with sustainable solutions. This process is difficult, demanding and exhausting. But the results that can be achieved justify all the energy and time and resources we invest. Last, but not least, given that the WB6 area has historically been a source of numerous conflicts and wars, and that even today there are those who advocate such attitudes and introduce threats into the public discourse, we should stress that war has never been a long-term sustainable solution. The conflicting parties always, sooner or later, must sit down at the negotiating table. Not always in the same role, of course. That is why it is good to

remember the words of the late President of the Republic of Croatia, Dr. Franjo Tuđman, said in Vukovar during the process of peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region: “A winner who does not know how to forgive sows the seeds of new conflicts and wars.”

Marko Prusina

Thank you Dr Akrap on this detailed presentation of the topic. I am convinced that most agree with your very precise formulations that lead us to our next guest.

Mr Iztok Mirošič, welcome to our studio.

Given that Slovenia will take over the presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of this year, I would like to kindly ask you for an insight into the developments and what we can expect in these six months, given that the possible enlargement could provide security and instability issues. What is your position on the enlargement process?

Iztok Mirošič

Thank you and hello from Ljubljana! As English is the working language of the Conference, allow me to continue in English. Mr Haibach already mentioned the Brdo-Brijuni Process which Croatia and Slovenia launched years ago to show the region how mutual collaboration could foster also the European perspective of the countries in the region. The last round of the Brdo-Brijuni Process took place in Brdo, not long ago. What I can say - this is my personal estimate - it showed not only what Mr Haibach said, that Western Balkans countries showed certain scepticism towards the European Union and its enlargement policy. On the other hand, it clearly showed us that we are still dealing with an

unstable region, which is still full of prejudices. For instance, the declaration regarding the border changes, which are not acceptable, but are introduced in this declaration, clearly showed us that we are still dealing with an unstable region. This leads us to the conclusion that the European policy should be much bolder, much more proactive in the Western Balkans and should demonstrate a clear-cut purpose in the enlargement efforts. This is key to make stabilization of the region viable and form a strategic view of the region, especially in the light of what Mr Akrap already said - if the European Union will not be active in the region, the gap will be filled by other actors on its doorstep.

Continuing this line of thought, let me say a few words about the Slovenian presidency of the European Union. Definitely the Western Balkans will be a priority during the Slovenian presidency, not only because this is our neighbourhood, but because it is also a very important factor for the European Union's international policy, not just neighbourhood policy, in other words, policy on the global scale. Failure by the European Union to perform efficiently in the region will reflect negatively in the context of global multipolar relations that are obviously developing in the world.

The programme of the Slovenian presidency regarding the Western Balkans basically derives from the Trio Presidency Programme drafted by Portugal, Slovenia and France. According to this Trio Programme, the Western Balkans is a region of strategic importance for the European Union. Even more, nowadays it is also a geopolitical priority – at least we believe it should be a geopolitical priority for the European Union. This Trio Programme gives us a clear confirmation of the European Union's perspective of the region which was set up in the Thessaloniki 2000 Conference and in the Zagreb Summit and was

endorsed during the Croatian presidency with the Western Balkans European Union Summit.

The next priority, of course, is the continuation of the enlargement process on the basis of the reinforced enlargement methodology, in line, again, with the Western Balkans EU Zagreb Summit. All the three countries of the Trio Presidency wish to draw special attention to the social and economic consequences of the Covid-19 crisis, despite some criticisms regarding the Covid engagement of the European Union in the region. We wish to accentuate the need for the recovery of the economies in the Western Balkans, but also support connectivity, rule of law and democracy, which are very important processes in the region, freedom of the media and particularly the strategic communication of the European Union towards the region. Some other aspects I wish to include are the resolution of political issues in bilateral relations, addressing the hybrid threats and disinformation, as well as fostering resilience and building a closer cooperation with common foreign and security policy of the European Union. That means that basically that we would like to foster resilience of the candidate countries in the region, countries aspiring to European Union membership.

The objectives, if I may explain in more detail, of the forthcoming Slovenian presidency firstly concern the implementation of the revised methodology in the opening and closing of the negotiation chapters. You are aware that there is a certain stalemate in the enlargement process occurring in the European Union at this moment. But the continuation of the enlargement process should be about the geostrategic orientation of the European Union and the European Union should see the region as a clear strategic or geostrategic value for the Union itself.

So we need to keep a close eye on the possible progress of the candidate countries. Our wish is to open four ITC intergovernmental conferences in the process of negotiations. It means with Serbia and with Montenegro according to the new methodology, as well as Albania and North Macedonia. The Portuguese presidency will not be possible to open all of them, it could basically only unlock the enlargement process which is nowadays basically, I would say, locked up.

The second priority is to continue to resolve the remaining security and political issues in the region, including the succession issues of the former Yugoslavia, the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština, specifically the normalisation of relations, the functionality of Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding the 14 priorities from the Avis. We would like to have and we will seek a stronger transatlantic cooperation with the new US administration, which proved to be and still is crucial for the progress in the region. There is also a need for closer cooperation in the common security policy. This means that we would like to strengthen the resilience of the Western Balkan countries in the field of cybersecurity. We have in planning a political declaration on cybersecurity of the Western Balkans, including a Conference of the Cybersecurity in the Western Balkans. Further on, there is a continuing fight against disinformation and the manipulation of the media, fight against terrorism, radicalisation, hybrid threats and fight against crime and corruption. We also wish to see a stronger and more functional confrontation with the migration problems that the Western Balkans is affected with. Included in this chapter is also the military mobility.

The third priority addresses the public health and the social-economic consequences of Covid-19. This means strengthening connectivity and the implementation of the common regional

market, including the green agenda, which means the green lanes project between the European Union and the Western Balkan countries, the rail and energy connectivity, decarbonization for the region, positive perspectives for the youth, which means working more on the guarantee for employment of the youth within the EU Economic and Investment Plan that is planned for the Western Balkans, possible inclusion of the Western Balkans into the Erasmus Plus Programme, including of the Western Balkans education systems into the European education area and so on.

This means also efficient implementation of the European Union Economic and Investment Plan for the region which amounts up to 9 billion euro. Here comes also digitalisation and innovation. That means that we would like to connect closer the region with the Digital Europe Programme and the Horizon Europe Programme, including the European Space Programme. Focusing on the concrete projects within the connectivity agenda, we have financial support, regional cooperation – which probably will not be sustainable without stronger EU political support and political will – reform processes in the region, regional cooperation, reconciliation and stabilization of the region. Basically, all of this will not be successful without a strong enlargement prospective which also means an efficient and viable enlargement process.

In that light, we will host in Slovenia the EU Western Balkans Summit. Of course, all the areas that I mentioned will be represented. We would like to have a regular, normal EU Western Balkans Summit at least one a year to revise the enlargement process of the European Union on the one side and on the other side to revise what kind of reforms are implemented in the region. Especially because the revised enlargement methodology demands bolder EU political activity

in the region. Of course, there are a lot of challenges in the region which will mark our presidency. One is, as you perfectly know, the continuation of the EU enlargement process. There is practically very little political will in this direction, especially among the bigger players. Mr Haibach said that Germany stands firmly behind the enlargement process and this was confirmed also recently during the visit of our Minister to the German Minister in Berlin. But we still observe a lack of firm political will for the enlargement process. On the other hand, there is also a lack of political will to perform the reform processes in the framework of the enlargement process among the countries of the region.

I think the political will be a crucial factor until the French elections in April next year. Then, we face the influence of the third actors in the region – Russia, China and also Turkey. Just observe the vaccine diplomacy of these countries in the region. This can pose a strategic problem for the European Union. Why? Because these are countries with quite different values than the values that the European Union would like to develop in Europe but also in the region of the Western Balkans. We observe that the developmental gap between the countries of the region and the European Union is not narrowing, but is widening. Also, the democratic processes and the rule of law are not improving, basically the democratic standards are lowering. This is also directly connected with the internal debate inside the European Union - what kind of principles we are standing for, and here we see some differences between the members from central Europe and the rest of the Union.

We will be faced with a quite severe migration crisis, combined with the Covid-19 pandemic and both of them are influencing the political and security picture of the region. That brings us again to the conclusion, basically, that the required change of

the European Union policy towards the Balkans should mean a much bolder policy, and include a broader strategic communication of the European Union with the region. I personally think, although there are many who would not agree with me, that we have a number of stabilization and security processes ongoing in the region. It begins with the enlargement process, then the Berlin Process, which will be held in July this year again, we have CEFTA, RACVIAC, Western Balkans 6 Process, the Mini-Schengen, in essence, a lot of processes. I think that we should concentrate, if the European Union is serious, on basically just one process and that should be the enlargement process. This is my personal opinion.

We should not underestimate the building of democracy, as the building of democracy and building of values is more important than having strong leaders in the region, especially if the structural reforms are not performed. There are some ideas to include the region directly into the internal single market of the European Union, but I am not sure whether this would be a very good idea. My reason for caution is firstly because these countries are not economically prepared to enter the single market due to competition and this is something that might bring us again to the rise of populism inside the European Union. What we have to do is to boost regional cooperation and developmental catch-up of the region. At least Slovenia is trying to include the countries of the Western Balkans into the conference on the future of Europe which just started in Strasbourg this month.

We do not enjoy full support in this, but Slovenia, and also Croatia desire to foster the cooperation of the countries of the Western Balkans, as future members of the European Union to participate in the conference on the future of Europe. To come back to this again, strategic communication is currently not good in the European Union, and this is something that should be

improved. I also wish to stress the enlargement process, because a viable, serious enlargement process is crucial for the stability and the economic development of the region. To achieve that goal, however, there should be a political will, which is currently below the desired level within the European Union.

I shall stop here. I am looking forward to answering to your questions later during the Conference.

Marko Prusina

Mr Mirošič, thank you for the overview of the situation. I think you have presented the relations to us very well and have made clear what is about to happen regarding possible scenarios.

We will get back to you for more comments, after we will hear the questions.

Allow me to welcome our next guest – that is Mr Stribor Kikerec. Mr Kikerec welcome. We have a question for you: do you think that the idea of EU enlargement is sufficiently well articulated?

Stribor Kikerec

Thank you for the question. I am really glad to be here with you, at this event organized by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Since we have agreed that the working language is English, I shall do so as well and continue in English.

The last time we have met was a long time ago, it was in December 2019. Back then I had the opportunity to participate in the first conference, which was the beginning of a series of events organized by your institutions. The situation back then was definitely different from the situation today, but it also shares some unfortunate features. At that time we were also faced with a kind of crisis in the enlargement process – it was

immediately after the inability of the European Council to support and make a political decision to open the negotiations with two Western Balkans countries, specifically with North Macedonia and Albania, and it was immediately in the eve of the Croatian presidency of the Council of the European Union. In that respect, when taking over the presidency at the moment of crisis in the enlargement project we decided to make Western Balkans and the policy of enlargement priorities of our presidency. There are some similarities between Croatia's position back then, and Slovenia's position today. In the meantime, however, during the first half of 2020, coinciding with the Croatian presidency of the EU, we witnessed nevertheless some important steps forward, I would even say breakthroughs. In this area, the main stumbling block was removed, owing to the agreement on the new methodology.

So the question now among the EU member states is how to proceed with the enlargement in the future, how to implement the improved methodology with a stronger accent on the political steering of the enlargement process. It was followed finally by the political decision to open the accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. At the peak of the Croatian presidency, with respect to one of its priorities, which was the Western Balkans, we organized the Western Balkans-EU Summit in Zagreb in May of last year. The whole Croatian presidency was plagued by the unexpected and unprecedented challenge of the Covid-19 pandemics. That was the reason why the idea of the economic and investment plan was not finalized during the Croatian presidency. It was produced at a later date, but at the Zagreb Summit it was announced as one of the major EU achievements with regards to the Western Balkans.

Unfortunately, the second half of 2020 and the first several months of this year have not seen major steps forward in terms of enlargement. The negotiating framework with North Macedonia and Albania was not agreed, and within the EU there were no major developments in the accession process of the two countries participating in that process, namely Montenegro and Serbia. The only development was that Montenegro opened the last negotiating chapter on the last day of the Croatian presidency. We did not have much progress in the European perspective of the remaining two potential candidate countries - Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

We do not know whether the EU will find a way to overcome the current stalemate in the enlargement process by the end the Portuguese presidency. It considerably raises the expectations from the upcoming Slovenian presidency. Of course, our Slovenian friends enjoy our wholehearted support in their ambition to make the Western Balkan region priority during their presidency. We would very much welcome and look forward to the next Western Balkans Summit, which is going to be organised under the Slovenian presidency. It was very good to hear from Mr Mirošić that the Slovenian ambition is to turn the Western Balkan Summits into regular periodic events in the future, as the importance of Western Balkans for the European Union is such, that this kind of step is necessary and, as you know, we also proposed it during our presidency.

In the meantime, in the last year and this year too, there was a whole series of events that influenced the developments. As I said, there was the Covid-19 crisis, elections in different Western Balkan countries, the relaunch of the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo with all the problems connected with that stalemate again, but there is the expectation to revive the dialogue the next month. But also, the migration crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Covid-diplomacy of the so-called third actors,

which produced a lot of commotion in the ranks of the European Union. I think that it is important to stress that in such times of crisis, especially in this time of crisis it is important not to lose the focus - what the enlargement is actually about. Recently, a specific narrative has started to gain traction about enlargement as a primary geopolitical issue, or a geopolitical necessity with a tendency to treat enlargement as a foreign policy tool of the European Union. It is not. Enlargement is not a foreign policy tool. With regard to the specific Western Balkans context, it cannot be exclusively a foreign policy tool. Of course, we all agree that the Western Balkan region is of extreme geostrategic importance for the European Union. Enlargement can and does have its geopolitical dimension, undoubtedly, but let's not forget that in first place enlargement is about democratic standards, the rule of law, the transformation of the societies, strengthening of capacities of the economies, etc.

By specific Western Balkans context I mean the fact that the EU deals with the Western Balkans through two different configurations of the Council. There is the Foreign Affairs Council which deals with political and security issues and the General Affairs Council where the policy of enlargement is. And they overlap insofar as keeping these countries on their reform track; and the euro-integration path is also a matter of not only theirs, but our own security. However, issues such as migration, the influence of the so-called third actors, the rise of authoritarianism that we are witnessing, hybrid threats, etc., all represent real political and security issues. In defining the current situation in the Western Balkans, it is clear that problems cannot be resolved only by a magic wand of the enlargement policy. As far as enlargement is concerned, the bottom line is that the Western Balkan countries themselves must credibly demonstrate that they genuinely want to become members of the EU. This ambition is demonstrated through the

implementation of reforms and the fulfilment of the membership criteria. That's it. The EU, of course, should help and guide them. It should deliver when they deliver, it is a matter of the EU credibility. It is extremely important, but the EU cannot take all the responsibility for these countries and their European future. I would like to stop here.

Marko Prusina

Mr Kikerec, thank you very much for your comment. Allow me now to announce the panel discussion in the second part of our WB6 Conference. I would like to invite also other participants to join us. And there is one question I have for Mr Akrap: The Brdo-Brijuni Summit was recently held. How do you assess that Summit? What is its message?

Gordan Akrap

I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to Ambassador Mirošić and Ambassador Kikerec – thank you for joining us at this Conference and thank you for providing the high-quality input. Both of the ambassadors more or less answered this question. Ambassador Mirošić said that it is a process that has to be very clearly defined and this is one of the pillars that the Slovene presidency of the European Council is going to do. Also, within the Trio Presidency, and that is something that is truly necessary. I wish to reiterate one item that Ambassador Kikerec said, that enlargement is a two-way process. First, the societies and the states of the Western Balkan 6 countries have to be ready to acknowledge this. It's not sufficient to say: "Yes, we want to be part of the European Union, we want to join you and be part of this extremely important club. But the homework we have to do, we will do a little later". No, you have to show to the European Union and to your societies, to your voters that you

are ready to accept the standards of the European Union, for instance respect for the human rights, the rule of law, democracy, security and stability.

Both of the Ambassadors also pointed out was that these countries have to work on their economies. Otherwise, if they will not be ready to join the European Union in all the sectors of human life, that might cause a problem that we all are going to be faced with later. On the other side, members of the European Union have to be aware that this is a lasting process. If we are not going to give them a chance to join us, someone else will do it. Someone else is going to deal with the problems. Like we already saw it. I think I can say publicly, as I am not a government employee, we saw what has happened recently in Montenegro, how the use of hybrid threats influenced the political situation and changed it radically. We saw the problems in North Macedonia. We saw the problems of huge instability in Serbia last year and at the beginning of this year with the street protests. We also witnessed the very significant challenges for the society in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially after publishing the so called "Slovenian non-paper" with the aim of the change of the borders and we saw now at the Brdo-Brijuni Process few days ago who probably stands behind it, who it is who does not want to accept the fact that former Yugoslavia was dissolved based on the decisions of the Badinter Commission, and one of the important conclusions of the Badinter Commission is that there is no changing of the borders.

This is something that those countries have to acknowledge. They have to live together, they have to find a way how to do it peacefully, and they have to work together. As I said in my introductory speech - the process of making majority, i.e. "one person, one vote" in multi-ethnic communities cannot be accepted completely, in the way as it has been accepted in

already formed democratic societies. EU member countries have to remember the processes their countries went through in 17th and 18th century. It is a process the West Balkan countries are going through now. And this is something we have to be patient with, but there has to be a hope for those countries to join the EU. Because, joining the EU is not the final aim they are supposed to achieve. It has to be one of the means for the final, strategic goal, which is to build a better, higher-quality, more democratic society, with a significant rule of law working for the benefit for all the citizens. This is not the rule only for the Western Balkan 6 countries who want to join the EU. Furthermore, we should ask not only what we as the European Union can do for them, but what can they give us in return. Because there is also this imminent issue of security. Recently we have seen it during the migration crisis. Most of the problems came through this region and if this region is unstable, disunited and weak, then there will be quite a lot of significant security challenges here that we will be faced with.

Marko Prusina

Mr Akrap, thank you for your contribution to our topic. Let us begin with the next part of our Conference - the discussion. If anybody would like to pose a question please do so.

Gordan Akrap

Until we are waiting to hear the first question from the colleagues from the region, allow me to ask Ambassador Mirošić to briefly comment a topic related to his position. I would like him to comment the process where it was really hard to reach a conclusion about the wish that was expressed in the proposed conclusions of the process that the borders are not going to be changeable. Could you please comment that? What was the

main issue that you were faced with in the process of reaching this declaration?

Iztok Mirošić

Before answering that question please allow me to comment two things that also Mr Kikerec mentioned. There is no doubt, the enlargement process is a transformation process. It is a transformation process of the society and at the end of the day also of the political structures, meaning the democracy of the countries. But still, since we have a new methodology, and since we have introduced a more significant political factor into the new methodology, it is also a political process. It is not just a security process, but it is also a political process. And since in the international relations we are dealing with politics, we have to bear in mind the geopolitical, as well as the strategic importance of this region for the European Union.

Let me say something about Mr Akrap's question. No doubt, in the Brdo-Brijuni Process which was held in Slovenia in the middle of the year, there is no secret about it, the most difficult problem was to reach an agreement concerning borders, to state the non-changeable nature of the borders in the declaration. For me personally this was very hard to understand, since we have the provision in the European Conference on Security and already in the Helsinki Charter that there are no changes of the borders, at least no changes that would come about by force. But this was the most difficult thing to agree upon. Politically, what emerged here and was demonstrated by the European Union by this lack of consent regarding this stipulation of the declaration is there are still political, and consequently, security problems in the region. When we combine that with what we read in the papers from the region,

let's say a small arms race in the region is showing us that the region, as I said, is not very stable.

My stipulation was also that on the basis of the Brdo-Brijuni meeting, the last meeting we had, the importance of the enlargement is primarily political, it is not just as a transformation process, although it is basically a transformation process, of the society and the economy. The political dimension of the enlargement process is very, very important and I agree fully that there is also the responsibility for furthering the enlargement process on the side of the Western Balkan countries. They should perform the reforms, which are currently not performing. They cannot just blame the European Union that it is too slow with the enlargement process. Still, the European Union has to bear in mind the political dimension of the enlargement process as well, especially in combination with the obviously different opinions about the borders in the countries in the region and in combination with the armed conflicts that might be coming up again in the region. I do not want to say that we are facing a new war there or something like that, but still in combination with the third players who are active in the region, this process should not be neglected by the European Union.

Gordan Akrap

Thank you Ambassador Mirošić. I would like to ask Ambassador Kikerec to comment that briefly. Will it be possible to compare the decisions and conclusions from the last year's Croatian presidency of the Council of the European Union when there was a meeting on the Western Balkans 6 countries and the European Union. What we saw there was the unity, we saw an intensive cooperation level when it was pointed out that the European Union is going to give additional amount of the significant amount of money, and resources and means in order

to help the West Balkans 6 countries fight with the negative influences of the Covid-19 pandemic and to help them boost the economy more sufficiently. On the other side, now we have the Brdo-Brijuni Process where we saw when there was no communication about the money. Also, that Serbia is still trying to keep the border issue with Kosovo open and probably someone else wishes that too. Can we see that this might be a problem for the public – as Ambassador Mirošič said - with the lack of strategic communication abilities, that this kind of attitude like the one we see in Serbia might negatively influence the public in the European Union and that might slow down the integration and transformation process?

Ambassador Kikerec, be so kind.

Stribor Kikerec

Thank you, Gordan. I don't know at the moment what is the current attitude of different public opinions in the EU member countries towards the enlargement policy in the Western Balkans. I don't think that this issue is very high on the general public's agenda in the European societies at the moment, because there are other priorities that concern those publics more. But definitely, this issue is not out of sight, and it is high on the list of priorities of the political leaderships of those countries, because they simply cannot allow themselves to neglect this issue. Whether the unfavourable developments in some of the Western Balkan countries have somehow pushed into the background some of those issues that you mentioned, like the pledge of assistance and resources of the EU to the Western Balkan countries. I do not know - all these issues are at the table at the moment within the EU, insofar as it deals with the issue of enlargement and the Western Balkans.

Things do overlap and are connected. I would just like to comment on what Mr Mirošić said – I completely agree with what he said, actually in what I myself previously said, I did not bring any of that into question. The political dimension of the enlargement process is extremely important, but in the sense that the political dimension of the EU's overall relation with the Western Balkans is extremely important. It has so many different features. The EU in the Western Balkans deals with so many different problems that cannot be resolved solely or exclusively with the instruments of the enlargement policy. That is only what I wanted to say not to lose the focus from what the enlargement policy is actually about. The EU has to develop also other policy tools in order to deal with all the problems that the situation in the Western Balkans poses for the European Union. One aspect of the activity which is very important and which I have not mentioned before, but Mr Mirošić mentioned briefly in his intervention, is the necessity of a closer cooperation between the EU and the United States in the Western Balkans. We saw what happens when the United States detaches itself from the Western Balkans. We saw what happened when the United States and the European Union cannot find a common ground in the field of – for example – the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo. It is extremely important in this respect, as well as in other respects too, when approaching the countries in the region, that the EU and the United States closely cooperate. This concerns the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, etc.

Gordan Akrap

We saw at the last six conferences that we organised – and I am very grateful to the Konrad Adenauer Foundation office in Zagreb and Ljubljana for that – is that those challenges are very

demanding and the problem is, I am afraid, that those challenges will continue to last in the future. I would like to ask few of the colleagues who are with us today - Sabrina from Italy and Livaja from Bosnia and Herzegovina if they have any questions, and then we will return to our guests.

Sabrina Magris

Good morning everyone and thank you for this very interesting Conference. I would like you to emphasize maybe some points that you have already touched upon within this agenda, regarding the different types of tracks. Do you have already mapped a specific track in the environment of defence or security? Thank you.

Gordan Akrap

What Sabrina said is also important – what we saw in our last conferences is that there are no taboo themes, we are trying to open all the questions that might help us to better understand those challenges that we are facing and that we are going to be faced with. As Ambassador Mirošić pointed out, on one side, it is a transformation process that the societies and states of the Western Balkan 6 countries must go through in order for them to be able to join us. On the other side, the security questions are also very important. It is not only the processes of integration we are dealing with in relation to the Western Balkans 6, it is not just a political process, it is a process of economic development of these states, the strengthening of the rule of law and especially, as we saw very clearly in 2015, when the societies and the states simply did not function, when we were faced with a huge migration wave that went through these area like a knife through the butter and caused significant

problems and challenges to all countries on its path, and to in Europe in general.

All of this gives an additional stimulus to the changing of the political situation on the national and international level. Those threats are something that we have to solve somehow. And one of the facts I saw in the European External Action Service and the European joint foreign policy is that those challenges are something we have to fight not on the European soil, but to do it abroad. This is something what Ambassador Mirošič said that in the European Union we try to foster its capabilities, because the stabilization of the Western Balkan 6 countries is not going to be the only thing that the Slovenian presidency is going to do. Am I right, Ambassador Mirošič?

Iztok Mirošič

Yes, absolutely. If you are asking me, I can just confirm what you already said, and as I myself have said many times before. I think we have a common understanding with Mr Kikerec as well, the enlargement process has many dimensions, it is pluri-dimensional. The most important used to be the transformation power of the enlargement process, meaning the changing of the societies into democratic societies, market economy, competition, societies with the rule of law and, at the end of the day, common values that we should have in the European Union. Despite all of that, we are noticing, as I already mentioned, that after concluding all the chapters in the negotiations and becoming a member of the European Union they are still slight differences in the understanding of the basic values and what the rule of law means inside the European Union. But this means that enlargement is also a political process and combining this

with the activities of the third actors in the region with different values, the political dimension of the enlargement becomes extremely important. That brings us to the definition of region as the geopolitical and geostrategic region for the European Union. And the security dimension is connected with this, too. I hope this is an answer to your question.

Marko Prusina

Mr Mirošić, thank you for your answer. We have also made it possible for other participants of the Conference to ask questions. There is a question for Ambassador Mirošić: how does Slovenia see the end of the process having in mind the laws in Bosnia and Herzegovina? The second question is also part of the 14 EU priorities, which is a question that at the moment represents the biggest burden to the inner processes of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is very demanding. How do you intend to resolve that?

Iztok Mirošić

The reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is no news regarding the election reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We in Slovenia have a long-standing position on that, which is that it has to be implemented. I heard that inside the European Union there are some new voices that maybe there should be a change of constitution, and after that the change of the election law. Our position is known for a long time. At the end of the day we have also co-sponsored the Croatian non-paper regarding the situation and the positions are crystal clear regarding that matter.

Gordan Akrap

Thank you, Ambassador Mirošič. Yes, you co-sponsored the Croatian non-paper, but Mr Kikerec might give us some additional info regarding that. As I said at the beginning, it was the only real non-paper that was attributed to someone really, as far as I remember. However, this non-paper was not accepted in the corridors of the EU as a position that has to be acted upon. Ambassador Kikerec, please comment that.

Stribor Kikerec

Thank you, Gordan. Yes, the non-paper was produced on the initiative of Croatia to which other 5 member states of the EU joined. It was presented collectively by Croatia and other five countries including Slovenia to Mr Borrell before the recent Foreign Affairs Council. It was the paper that tried to present soberly the challenges which Bosnia and Herzegovina is faced with, and to recommend certain steps, or recommendations regarding the way forward. It is interesting and it was mentioned by you, Gordan, at the very beginning of the today's Conference, that sober and serious steps aimed at addressing the issues in the Western Balkans somehow were overshadowed by some phantom initiatives, which do not have clear authors, like the non-paper that spoke about the change of the borders in the Western Balkans, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Kosovo, etc. It is very important that such distractions do not completely overtake the public narrative about what is important in the Western Balkans and in what direction the Western Balkans countries should develop.

As far as the question that Ms. Livaja asked the participants of the Conference is concerned, I would just like to once again point out the specific Croatian position on this, for the stability and the functionality of the country, of course. Important preconditions are reflected in the 14 priorities of the European

Union. The reform of the electoral system, or more particularly, amending the electoral law in Bosnia Herzegovina, from our standpoint and according to our view, is extremely important as one of the first steps in order to bring stability and better functionality to the country, especially in the view of the upcoming general elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the year 2022. That is one of the reasons why it is very important to deal with the reform of the electoral law in that country right now.

And as far as the principles of that reform are concerned, there are two aspects that, according to our view, the reform of the electoral law should deal with. There are two existing features of discrimination in this country. One is the type of discrimination which does not allow the citizens in that country to enjoy equal active and passive electoral voting rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The other issue is the discrimination of the smallest constituent people in Bosnia and Herzegovina which is not able to elect their legitimate political representatives into the highest institutions of the country. We think that the reform of the electoral law has to deal with both of those two types of discrimination, has to resolve them, and we think that there are models which enable such electoral system which will include both the implementation of the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights and the protection of the principle of legitimate representation of the constituent peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Marko Prusina

Mr Kikerec, thank you very much for your comments, and allow me to say thank you to all the participants of our WB6 Conference who have joined us today. This one, as the other WB conferences was successful, and I think this is a format with

which we should continue. Now I would like to ask Mr Akrap to close the Conference.

Gordan Akrap

Thank you, Marko. Thank you, dear ambassadors and dear guests. Allow me to conclude in the same way I have started and opened the Conference, namely in Croatian.

As the gentleman at the end said about the non-paper, it is a product of the joint work and the outcome should be the addressing and identifying issues in a way to provide proper solutions to the existing challenges. Proper solutions for the countries who are about to walk on the path towards the European Union, in order to overcome the situations they are coping with. These areas have been part of the integrative processes and have shown that both Croatia and Slovenia have enough experience and knowledge and are familiar with the context of the entire background processes which try to undermine the security level of a country. This principle is, according to my opinion, the proper direction the European Union should take. As Ambassador Mirošić said, this is the only way how to stabilize the countries and how these countries could achieve a certain level where they could accede the European Union properly and could join us. This is the moment when, from now on, we share the same challenges and the same opinions within the European Union. We should continue to try to identify the challenges and the security level.

Marko Prusina

Thank you once again for joining us. Allow me now to close this WB6 Conference and say thank you for joining us.