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Summary Report

THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION OF THE WESTERN BALKANS: RESILIENCE, FAILURES, AND CHALLENGES

International Virtual Conference and e-Roundtable side event

11 - 12 June 2020



*This Conference was organized by the Department of Political Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, the University of Tirana and the Center Science and Innovation for Development (SciDEV) in the framework of the Jean Monnet Project "Resilience and European Integration of the Western Balkans," Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

Overview

On 11th and 12th of June 2020, distinguished speakers from academia, international donor community, civil society, and policy sector participated in the final International Conference "Resilience and European Integration of the Western Balkans" of the Department of Political Sciences of the University of Tirana in the framework of the Jean Monnet Module 2017-2020, co-funded by the [Erasmus+ Program](#) of the European Commission. The event was organized online due to the situation caused by the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Klodiana Beshku coordinated the two days event organized by the Department of Political Sciences of the University of Tirana and the Centre "Science and Innovation for Development" (SCiDEV), senior Lecturer of this Department, supported by Dhurata Milori and Nysjola Dhoga, members of the same Department and SCiDEV Team.

The focus of the first day of this virtual International Conference were issues related to resilience, failures, and challenges of the European Integration Process of the Western Balkans and the recent opening up of the accession talks for Albania and North Macedonia. In this unprecedented moment of global crisis, the Conference also focused on the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on health policy, the international economic outlook, and global cooperation.

Full videos of each conference panel

The Jean Monnet Module staff of the Department of Political Sciences of the University of Tirana and SCiDEV are happy to now provide a summary of the event, as well as the video links of the three-panel debates of the Conference:

[Panel 1: Post-COVID 19's implications to the European Integration of the Western Balkans](#)

[Panel 2: Geopolitical Approach of the European Union to the Western Balkans](#)

[Panel 3: Albania in the Western Balkans and the European Union: Past, Present, and Future](#)

Day 1, 11 June 2020- The European Integration of the Western Balkans: Resilience, Failures, and Challenges

The Conference brought together distinguished academics dealing with the Region (Prof. [Florian Bieber](#) from [BiEPAG](#)) and with EU's Security Issues and Foreign Policy (Prof. [Doris Wydra](#) of the [University of Salzburg](#)), policymakers (Ambassador Luigi Soreca, Delegation of European Union to Albania and Mr. Ditmir Bushati, Deputy of the Albanian Parliament and Former Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs) and representatives of civil society (Gentiola Madhi from Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso – Transeuropa). Around 70 students were registered and attended the Conference online. They addressed questions to the panelists at the end of their presentations.

The first panel of the 11 June Conference focused on Post COVID-19's implications to the Western Balkans' European Integration.

This panel was moderated by Klodiana Beshku, Lecturer at the University of Tirana and coordinator of this Jean Monnet Module. HE Luigi Soreca, Ambassador of the Delegation of the European Union to Albania, and Gentiana Kera, vice-Rector of the University of Tirana, greeted this panel.

HE Luigi Soreca, in his high-level opening speech, mentioned that the Covid-19 did not have any adverse effect on the relations of the EU with the Western Balkans and that the reaction of the EU through the economic assistance to the Western Balkans has been very prompt. During the crises, the European solidarity has not stopped during the Covid-19 pandemics and during the November earthquake. He focused on the need for a more robust political party cooperation and political compromise in Albania.

The Vice-Rector of the University of Tirana, Ms. Gentiana Kera, analyzed the universities' challenge during the unusual times caused by Covid-19. She also examined the high percentage of the Albanian population in favor of European Integration and the importance of the process.

The Deputy of the Albanian Parliament and The Former Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, Ditmir Bushati, in his speech "European Union and the Western Balkan: State of Affairs after the COVID 19", explained the role of the European Union during the Covid-19 pandemics and its position on the front line to face the crisis. Mr. Bushati mentioned the refugee crisis's challenges for the EU, the German-French relations, and the new Enlargement methodology. Mr. Bushati said that the European Union serves the Balkans as a model of democratization and reforms.

Professor Florian Bieber from the University of Graz discussed the enlargement during the Pandemic and the Western Balkans' prospects. He focused on the dependency of the economy of Albania and the Western Balkans on the economy of the EU. The Pandemic, he stated, was perceived as the EU showed little solidarity towards affected member states. Because of the disinformation and the high level of criticism, the EU did not do enough. He pointed to the European Union's problems and its skepticism to deal with other countries that could carry on issues for the Union. He mentioned the authoritarian tendencies that were risen during the Covid-19 in the Western Balkans.

Prof. Enika Abazi from the University of Lille held an actual discussion titled "Continuing EU Enlargement in Corona's time: Great expectations or the end of illusions for the WB." Abazi stressed the importance of Conditionality used by the European Union for the Western Balkans. Without this mechanism, the Western Balkans would not have been able to go on through essential reforms. She also analyzed the geopolitical developments and the impact of Russia, China, and Turkey's influence in the region.

Vedran Džihčić from the University of Vienna presented an exciting work with the provocative title of "Europeanization without democratization? Exploring subtle and efficient ways to say NO to

Europa". Džihić focused on the differences between the six countries of the Western Balkans and their common problem of the political leadership authoritarianism. He stated that one of the main challenges of these countries was to hold free and fair elections. Without free and fair elections, the democracy of these countries will be continuously undermined.

The Second Panel: "Geopolitical Approach of the European Union to the Western Balkans" was moderated by Prof. Erika Abazi, Peace Research Institute, Paris, France.

Professor Doris Wydra of the University of Salzburg gave a fascinating keynote speech of the title "The role of the Russian Federation in the Western Balkan: the EU perspective." Prof. Wydra stopped on the EU approach to fighting the Russian and China interests in Western Balkans. She explained why during the Covid-19, Russia undermined the EU credibility on the crisis by making Russia more visible when the most significant support was that of the European Union.

Prof. Daniela Irrera, by the University of Catania, brought for this event an interesting presentation titled "A new Great Game in the Western Balkans? Global hegemonic tendencies and regional opportunities". She argued how the Western Balkans is becoming a region often used by the great players to raise their power, hegemony, and regional interest.

Professor Seda Gürkan from the Université Libre de Bruxelles presented the topic "Lessons learned from EU-Turkey relations." Gürkan, through the long road of Turkey towards the EU, analyzed three essential aspects of this process: Conditionality, The importance of Turkey's domestic policies, and the politicization of the EU enlargement process, by both sides of the coin.

Gentiola Madhi from the Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, Transeuropa presented "Diluting principles, darkening EU accession perspective: Politicization of Kosovo's visa liberalization process" where she analyzed the impacts of the politicization of the visa liberalization process in Kosovo. She focused on the European Union countries skepticism and especially on the role of the Netherlands and France regarding the visa liberalization process and EU enlargement

Klodiana Beshku (University of Tirana) 's presentation was titled" EU's approach on the Western Balkans in 2020: It's the front-yard, stupid!" Beshku stressed the importance of the EU's geopolitical perspective, the historical background of using this perspective, and why the geopolitical terminology is not well explored within the EU. She mentioned that the EU is not prepared enough and keen to consider the Western Balkans as a geopolitical region and listed the numerous contradictions within the EU towards the Western Balkans.

The Third Panel: Albania in the Western Balkans and the European Union: Past, Present, and Future, was moderated by Klodiana Beshku, University of Tirana. The presentations and discussions of this panel mainly focused on Albania and its links to the EU, the historical background of Albania-EU relations, its public administration, emigration phenomena, minority rights, and its electoral reform, and Education and Research in the Western Balkans.

Prof. Merita Xhumari from the University of Tirana had a presentation on "The Role of the EU in promoting research in Western Balkans," mentioning the role of the EU in the stabilization and association project in the Western Balkans and the common factors that get close to the Western Balkan countries in the field of research. She stressed the importance of sharing the experience in the Western Balkan countries and promoting science and research. Xhumari focused more on the Albanian case and recommended that the researcher be recognized as a defined Albania profession.

Prof. Nevila Xhindi from the Mediterranean University of Albania presented, "The role of education promotes Albania's European values. " Her presentation based on a study realized in different High Schools in Albania. She stressed the importance and the need for education of the society with European values as in the recommendations of this study

Simone Paoli from the University of Pisa discussed the topic "The European Union and Albania: A Historical Overview" by stressing some of the most critical moments of this relation after 1990 and analyzing the integration process from historical background.

Edon Qesari from the Mediterranean University of Albania held a presentation titled "EU, a condemned Union: The critique debate of being part of Albania. " Qesari analyzed the disagreements within the EU, the image of the EU in the Western Balkan countries and the biggest dilemma of every country in the integration process whether the sovereignty should be delegated to the Community or the European Union Institutions.

Nysjola Dhoga (University of Tirana) 's presentation was "The EU's transformative power: from Agencification to Rationalization of the Albanian Public Administration." In her speech, Dhoga showed the chronology of the public administration reform in Albania and analyzed the European integration context's institutional bodies. She stressed the importance of the European reforms and their contribution to the institutional framework in Albania.

Marsela Sako from the University of Tirana based her speech on the "Minority Policies during the Albanian Integration process towards EU." Sako shortly analyzed the main pillars of EU enlargement and the requirement on national minority rights in Albania. She mentioned the importance of legislative transformation to respect the minority right's in Albania.

Dhurata Milori from the University of Tirana held a presentation titled "European integration of Albania: The impact of high rates of youth emigration for the country. " Milori, based on survey research directed to the students of the University of Tirana, identified the main reasons and factors that push the youth to leave the country, the economic and social effects of the massive flows of the youth to the European Union. On the other hand, she analyzed the European Union's problems caused by a large number of emigrants from the Western Balkans. She concluded with several recommendations based on this research and the literature review.

Alketa Marku from the Aleksandër Moisiu University of Durrës discussed the "The electoral system in Albania: A challenge for political actors in the negotiation process with the EU." She focused on

the last recommendations for the approval of this reform, also mentioning the most critical changes in the electoral system in Albania

Day 2, 12 June 2020- The e-Roundtable "Discussing Future Collaborations in the Framework of Erasmus+ Projects."

The e-Roundtable "Discussing Future Collaborations in the Framework of Erasmus+ Projects" was moderated by Nysjola Dhoga, University of Tirana. This second day brought together universities, research centers, and CSOs to discuss ideas and possibilities for future partnerships in project developments, particularly in EU integration and Regional Cooperation and the Jean Monnet Program of Erasmus+ framework.

The e-Roundtable was greeted by representatives of the University of Tirana (Elton Skëndaj, Head of International Relations) and the University of Salzburg (Franz Kok, ERASMUS-coordinator). The other participants of the discussion were: Elona Saraçi from Erasmus+ Office Albania, Vilma Beqa as an Albanian PoSIG student at the University of Salzburg, Maja Savić-Bojanić from the Sarajevo School of Science and Technology, Aneta Cekikj from Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Valida Repovac Nikšić from University of Sarajevo, Aleksandar Pavlovic from the University of Belgrade in the co-organizers' representatives: Blerjana Bino Co-Founder from the Center Science and Innovation for Development (SCiDEV) and Klodiana Beshku, Dhurata Milori, and Nysjola Dhoga from the University of Tirana