Young Generations for the New Balkans

Towards
Vision 2030

Taking Stock and Looking Forward

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

When our initiative Young Generations for the New Balkans 2030: Towards Alternative Horizons was first launched in May 2018, it had two key goals. First, to set the spotlight on the region's young people, their progressive attitudes, and their hopes for the future. And second, to promote a longer-term vision for the region. Since then, members of the initiative, together with local and international partners, have discussed the overall socio-political situation in the Western Balkans as well as the region's EU and NATO integration through workshops, conferences, seminars, panel discussions, and policy recommendations.

In December 2019, the initiative published a paper titled "Vision 2030: Towards Alternative Horizons." This paper laid out a concrete vision for the region in eight key areas, analysed the current situation in the six countries, and proposed concrete policy steps needed to turn this vision into reality. This vision foresaw a region in 2030 that is profoundly transformed and fully integrated with the EU.

The initiative promoted the paper across the EU and the Western Balkans. Since then, 24 panels have been organised, 101 interviews have been conducted, and 9 visits to 9 countries have taken place, from France to Albania.

In the meantime, the world – and Europe in particular – have gone through dramatic changes.

5 PUBLICATIONS

9 STUDY VISITS

24 PANEL DISCUSSIONS

101 EXPERT INTERVIEWS

In 2020, the global pandemic rendered societies throughout the region even more vulnerable but also ever more interdependent. The most consequential shift, however, came in February 2022, with the full-scale, unprovoked, and illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The EU's positive and rapid response to Ukrainian, Moldovan, and Georgian membership applications demonstrated support for enlargement among EU member states previously considered deeply sceptical. This created a sense that EU enlargement was back on the agenda. As a result, Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status in June 2022. To make their accession paths more credible, in late 2022, the governments of France and Germany commissioned a report on EU institutional reform from a group

Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik Austrian Institute for International Affairs

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of twelve experts. The group was asked to propose EU internal reforms that would be needed for the Union to grow to 30+ member states. The subsequent report, titled "Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century," was published in September 2023, provoking open and heated debate.

In December 2023, EU heads of states and governments (the European Council), agreed to open accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova as well as to grant candidate status to Georgia. In the Western Balkans, EU leaders called "for the acceleration of their accession process" and reiterated their commitment "to advancing the gradual integration between the European Union and the region." Furthermore, EU leaders

concluded that "enlargement is a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity." To achieve it, they noted that "both future Member States and the EU need to be ready at the time of accession" and that "work on both tracks should advance in parallel." They committed themselves to "address internal reforms at its upcoming meetings with a view to adopting by summer 2024 conclusions on a roadmap for future work."

It is encouraging to see that some of our December 2019 proposals, such as the need for an "accelerated accession" and a "gradual integration," have now been widely accepted by EU and Western Balkan leaders. If implemented, these commitments by the EU have significant potential to transform and move the Western Balkan region closer to the EU.

However, the reality on the ground in the Western Balkans in recent years is that the situation has been deteriorating. The Covid-19 pandemic led to human rights violations and a democratic decline. To be fair, this was not exclusive to the Western Balkans. But, as a result, our initiative formulated and adopted in April 2022 a declaration on dealing with authoritarianism, titled "United for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law."

The war in Ukraine and the subsequent response to it has further deepened the divide between NATO and non-NATO countries in the Western Balkans. In 2023, we witnessed a return to violence between Kosovo and Serbia as well as warnings about potential conflict in the region issued by the EU High

Representative for Foreign and Security Policy and NATO's Secretary General. Instead of a celebration of democracy, Serbia's parliamentary and local elections in December 2023 turned into a showdown on what was left of democracy in the region's largest country. At the same time, attacks on the institutional and constitutional architecture of Bosnia and Herzegovina have increased, while the EU and the international community have not been able to find an effective response.

It is in this context that our initiative and its members decided to come together in early 2024 in order to look back at the 2019 paper, take stock on their vision and proposals, and look towards the future. The group quickly agreed that their vision for the region in 2030 remained the same, but, given the dramatic changes in the region since then, the path to converting their vision into reality required a careful revisit. In this paper, new areas, such as media freedom, have therefore been added.

TOWARDS VISION 2030

Welcome to the smaller but wealthier, more (socially) just, more democratic, and more interconnected European Western Balkans! This may be the shortest summary of the following paper, which sublimes all our hopes, not-too-distant horizons, and shivery dreams for 2030 into one document.

It is no secret that the region's population is shrinking and aging. The reasons behind this trend are multiple and so deep-rooted that even the best-case scenario would not see it reverse within the next six years. However, if this trend has slowed down by then, it could be a key indicator that our Vision 2030 is becoming a reality.

To achieve our Vision 2030, it is essential that, **by December 2025**, the EU abides by its commitment to the "acceleration of the accession process" and "advancing the gradual integration" of the Western Balkan region. In doing so, the EU must use all existing and future openings in the region to push for reforms and progress. In parallel, with recent developments in mind, it is also important to pay particular attention to the prevention of any future violence.

During the next two years, **the EU should**:

1. Make sure that the next European Commission has a **Commissioner in charge of EU enlargement** who has the necessary credibility, political experience, mandate, and tools to work towards two key goals in the Western Balkans: an accelerated accession process and a gradual integration.

2. Make sure that the next European Commission has a High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy who has the necessary credibility, political experience, mandate, and tools to move forward the **EU-led dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia** as well as to adequately address challenges in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**.

3. Make sure that **Montenegro** becomes a true front-runner with a realistic chance of becoming **the 28th EU member state by 2028,** when the next EU multiannual financial framework begins. To achieve this, the new Montenegrin government needs to be given a fair chance and the necessary political, technical, and financial support to implement the necessary reforms in order to start closing negotiating chapters by the end of 2025.

4. A success in Montenegro would undoubtedly have positive spill-over effects in other Western Balkan countries, foremost in **North Macedonia,** where a new dynamic could be created in the aftermath of the 2024 parliamentary elections, but also in **Albania**. There would also be mid-

term spill-over effects in **Serbia**, which in turn would have positive effects on **Kosovo** and **Bosnia and Herzegovina**.

5. EU member states should find a legal and political path to respond positively to **Kosovo's membership application** as soon as possible. While the long-awaited visa liberalisation with Kosovo is a welcome step, without finding a way to positively respond to Kosovo's membership application, the promise of the country's EU perspective remains elusive.

6. This and the next European Commission need to make sure that the **New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans** succeeds. The logic behind this plan is correct: more financial support, combined with increased integration in the region and with the EU's single market, in return for more and concrete reforms (including on rule of law and difficult political decisions). However, to succeed, the financial aspects need to be sufficiently large, and there must be a credible prospect that governments that do not deliver are left behind.

7. In parallel, the next European Commission needs to **develop a concrete and robust plan for the region's gradual integration with the EU**. Money alone will not push reforms in the region forward. This is particularly important if, for any reason, the EU does not take concrete steps to accommodate new members or national elections in EU member states push the EU internal debate against enlargement. In this case, a robust plan for the region's gradual integration with the EU would help keep the EU's leverage in the region as well as push reforms forward.

These are seven key points that, if achieved, would grant the region a credible EU perspective that would allow reformers in the region to come together and embark on a journey towards a transformative future.

This paper, titled "Towards Vision 2030: Taking Stock and Looking Forward," delves into nine pivotal pillars that would collectively sculpt the socio-political future of the Western Balkans. As the region grapples with the intricacies of governance, societal shifts, and the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies, these pillars will serve not only to address existing challenges but also to illuminate a pathway and a roadmap for the Western Balkans moving forward. The paper takes a holistic perspective into account, navigating complexities while envisioning a future firmly grounded in democratic principles, social cohesion, and prosperity.

1. RULE OF LAW-BASED LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES WITH ENGAGED CITIZENS

V I S I O N

By 2030, the Western Balkans are an interconnected region with market economies and liberal democracies based on the rule of law. Institutions in each of the six countries are strong, independent, and professional. The understanding of civic engagement has developed in a direction whereby citizens are aware of their civil rights and the power of civic initiatives.

In 2023, democracies in the Western Balkans remain fragile. According to the European Commission, none of the six Western Balkans states is a functioning market economy. In addition, no country in the region has achieved a rule of law level that would allow for EU membership. The risk of moves to narrow the freedom of assembly and shrink public spaces remains too high.

While Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo are, according to some international rankings, performing better than others along various democratic measurements, challenges across the region remain similar.

As shown by the most recent elections in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 2023 and 2022 respectively, electoral processes in the region face enormous shortcomings, including the misuse of public funds, the judiciary, and the security services. Corruption in these institutions is omnipresent, and citizens' awareness of the possibility of political change through elections is low, with electoral results often contested. Societies are deeply polarized, and many institutions have been captured. Independent media outlets face mounting pressure, becoming targets of hate speech, further exacerbating the fractious political landscape. Many opposition parties, delegitimized and maligned, struggle against a backdrop of pro-regime media narratives, which paint them as adversaries acting against national interests.

To bring the Vision 2030 to reality, enormous changes are imperative. Political elites and citizens must recognize themselves as the drivers of reform and institution-building processes. This is why it is important to create and increase funding mechanisms to recognise and support citizen initiatives, activism, and the protection and widening of the public space. The EU has already lent substantial support to grassroots initiatives and investigative and free media in the Western Balkans, which, however, should be further increased, for example through the European Endowment for Democracy.

The New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans should also be utilized to push through reforms that would ensure the rule of law, democratic development, and civic freedoms.

The EU must become more open and critical of the authoritarian tendencies in each of the countries of the region. This would help civil society and free media to create an environment for dialogue, a reduction in tensions (that render the outcomes of democratic processes unfair), and even fair competition in electoral races.

As a matter of priority, countries in the region need to introduce changes to their electoral systems that bring them into line with EU and international standards. Such a change would see political representatives less estranged from their voters and therefore betterable to represent the interests of citizens, rather than serving their personal or party interests.

"I think these sorts of situations of transition, reconciliation, these huge political processes do require political leadership. And that means that you don't only try to assess what the majority thinks and then model that, but you try to bravely put things on the agenda and say, this is what I believe, this is what I think we need to do." – Mario Mazić (Croatia)

"I see as the best possible support from EU would be to bring clarity to how far the everyday practices in candidate countries are from what the EU standards are. Or what is required of members. For example, in the rule of law. How do our courts function? Our prosecutor offices? How far is that from the EU average? And in regular intervals, via understandable reports, explain what authorities did and what more could be done." – Adnan Ćerimagić (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

2. WITH A SHARED COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE FOR VICTIMS

V I S I O N

By 2030, the Western Balkans are a peaceful region of democratic and open societies. It is a region built upon a shared rejection of ethnic nationalism, a common appreciation of every human life, and a shared commitment to justice for every victim.

Already in 2019, regional cooperation among the countries of the former Yugoslavia regarding the prosecution of war crimes was stagnating. Since then, it has only deteriorated. Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to make consistent (yet modest) progress in prosecuting war crimes cases at a national level, while, in Kosovo, the Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office has made some progress. In other countries, local judiciaries demonstrate signs of political pressure as well as an inability to adequately prosecute individuals responsible for war crimes. For example, Serbia has to date failed to prosecute high-ranking officials.

Furthermore, this is coupled with denial and relativization from the top levels of governments, each providing exclusive, one-sided narratives that reject facts established at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and other courts. Even humanitarian processes, such as locating and identifying missing persons, despite renewed promises, are heavily burdened by such discourse.

No democratic nation can exist without a viable system that helps it to ensure accountability. A functional, independent, and unbiased justice system is a *conditio sine qua non* of a democratic state. And in the Western Balkans, the ability to effectively prosecute war crimes, alongside the ability to prosecute (political) corruption, is an indicator of how (under)developed, (un)biased and (in)dependent a judicial system is. Differently put, former Yugoslav nations will never be stable or peaceful democracies if significant investments are not made to strengthen their justice systems and enable them to prosecute those responsible for the most heinous violations of human rights and humanitarian law.

Western Balkan societies and leaders must acknowledge injustices, regardless of who they were committed by, and engage in bona fide cooperation aimed at bringing justice for all victims. The EU, on the other hand, should be clear and consistent in demanding the development of sufficient local judicial capacities; support and, when necessary, facilitate processes of regional cooperation around humanitarian issues and criminal matters; and offer political support to initiatives by civil society, such as RECOM, that aim to achieve progress in justice and reconciliation.

It is noteworthy that the prosecution of war crimes and respect for verdicts delivered by international tribunals are part of the EU accession process and, as such, obligations that candidates must meet before joining the EU. With the promise of an acceleration in the EU accession process, these obligations need to once again become part of the EU's priorities in the region.

> *"I see dealing with the past as a way of moving forward. Especially given the complete neglect and lack of any national or governmental approaches to reconciliation. Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) is left with creating these transitional justice mechanisms and reconciliation mechanisms on grassroot or a bottom-up approach."* – Ajla Borozan (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

> *"In my opinion, the reconciliation process in Serbia was mostly externally-driven and -funded. It lacked local ownership and true political commitment. Reconciliation as such was never a priority for governments in Serbia. When they were pressured, then they sometimes put the reconciliation on political agenda. But that's not something that was constant. In Serbia, reconciliation was, to the great deal, civil society-driven process."* – Maja Bjeloš (Serbia)

3. EDUCATION THAT PROVIDES THE BASIS FOR A STABLE LIFE

V I S I O N

By 2030, the Western Balkan Six have reformed their educational systems so that they shape, connect, and keep young people in touch with real life and provide further development opportunities. This is best demonstrated through sharp and continuous improvements of the PISA ranking of these countries. Furthermore, the educational systems enable the knowledge transfer of democratic values, civic rights and liberties, critical thinking skills, and an understanding of individual responsibility and teamwork.

While access to education is not a challenge in the region, access to good quality education continues to be a privilege. The 2022 PISA rankings showed no major changes in the region compared to previous rounds. The Western Balkan countries continue to find themselves at the bottom of the rankings, with the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which did not even take part in the latest assessment. Western Balkan students do not sufficiently understand what they read or learn to use it in practice and are barely functionally literate. The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, which included remote schooling, brought some progress in digitalization. But, as elsewhere in the world, it also left several generations lagging behind their pre-pandemic peers.

Throughout the region, critical thinking remains an undervalued skill in formal education. In addition, youth participation both at the school and local levels is dependent upon the goodwill of schools in most Western Balkan countries. There is no systematically-secured support for this process. This leaves young people out of social processes on a daily basis, especially in policy creation and decision-making processes.

A priority in reforming educational systems in the region remains focusing on the use of knowledge in practice and getting familiarized with the labour market before finishing university. There is still a lack of connectivity between academic curricula, labour market needs, and the private sector in particular. The proportion of young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET) in the 15-24 age group averages 23,7 % in the Western Balkans, ranging from 15,9 % in Serbia to 37,4 % in Kosovo. This is compared to just 11,1 % in the EU.

Instead of emphasizing repetitive and rather theoretical learning, the region's educational systems need to be adjusted, upgraded, and aligned with European best practices so that they are in accordance with the social context in which young generations are growing up. Instead of putting students in a passive

listening position in classrooms, we must support independent research, ideas, and creativity so that young people start shaping their respective societies as early as possible. The educational systems should be supportive of students, encouraging rather than suppressing their critical opinions and demands and preparing them for their adult lives. Education should not be seen as a goal but as an empowering mechanism for social change. Lastly, learning from peers across countries must become a common practice in the region, just as in the EU. Instead of study visits that often become an eye-opening experience about where and how young people live nowadays (and thus potentially contributing to brain drain from the region), learning from peers needs to become a sustainable educational practice and a positive model for cooperation and development in the region.

"Addressing brain drain is not going to be easy. But we need to start thinking ten years in advance. What do we expect for young people in general? Or through education? I believe that the region first needs to secure education that is going to provide a stable basis for development of independent young individuals. So, if I had a chance to decide on what the first step of making the Western Balkans a better place would be, it would be securing better quality of education." – Stefani Spirovska (North Macedonia)

"Young people find it difficult to find a proper job in their countries, so they are obliged to leave their countries. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, in education they have a segregation." – Vilson Blloshmi (Albania)

4. WITH FREE AND DIVERSE MEDIA

VISION

By 2030, the Western Balkan countries have free and diverse media. When it comes to media freedom, all six have reached the EU average and, in some respects, are setting standards for 'old' EU member states.

According to the latest Reporters Without Borders report, Albania, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are doing worse than other countries in the region in terms of media freedom. In the past year, Serbia has even deteriorated. North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo show potential for a trend of improvement.

In Serbia, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is a high number of registered media outlets, but few are independent. The political climate is highly polarised, and journalists are subject to attack. In Albania, for example, journalists are victims of organised crime, and institutions fail to protect them. Neither politicians nor institutions show a willingness to change this situation. Public broadcasters fail to fulfil their role due to

political and financial constraints. In the last couple of years, authorities in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina (specifically in Republika Srpska) have introduced legislation and rules narrowing the freedom of media.

To reach our Vision 2030, major changes will be necessary both in the region and in the EU's approach to the region. Without a domestic push and request for free and diverse media as well as changes within the media community, the EU's approach can only have limited success at best. As a matter of priority, countries in the region should work on the de-capturing of media regulatory agencies as well as striking down, where applicable, legislation that limits media freedom. Furthermore, revisiting media ownership rules and successfully prosecuting attacks on journalists are key. The EU and other international actors should continue to support free and investigative journalism in the region as well as civil society

initiatives that foster the freedom of media. Open access to the media market will continue to be a priority.

"No Western Balkans state will be able to join the EU without being a full-fledged democracy with free media. This is why EU must take more active role in creating safer environment for journalists – what was not the case in previous years. The region should work and put much more effort in building safer environment to have independent media and professional reporting and investigating." – Vuk Velebit (Serbia)

"No society can have an open, constructive debate unless it has free, independent media that can report facts and instigate public debates. Any pressure on media and journalists is treasonous work that goes against the national interest." – Mario Mazić (Croatia)

5. INTERCONNECTED: A GRADUAL PATH TOWARD THE EU

VISION

Cooperation among the countries in the region is progressively rooted in the socio-political and economic spheres. Political elites have grown convinced that regional cooperation is the right way to solve bilateral issues and reach agreements on the most contentious issues. Moreover, such methods do not require the heavy involvement of external actors. Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia are full members of the EU, while Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are expected to join together on 1 January 2035.

For our Vision 2030 to turn into reality, the EU must stick to its December 2023 promise of an "acceleration of the accession process" and "advancing the gradual integration" of the region. In doing so, the EU must use all existing and future openings in the region to push for reforms and progress. In parallel, with recent developments in mind, it is also important to pay particular attention to the prevention of future violence.

By December 2025, the EU should make sure that the next European Commission has a Commissioner in charge of EU enlargement who has the necessary credibility, political experience, mandate, and tools to work towards two key goals in the Western Balkans: an accelerated accession process and a gradual integration. This should come in addition to a High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy who will also need the necessary credibility, political experience, mandate, and tools to move forward the EU-led dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia as well as to adequately address challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Furthermore, the EU needs to make sure that Montenegro becomes a true front-runner with a realistic chance of becoming the 28th EU member state by 2028, when the next EU multiannual financial framework begins. To achieve this, the new Montenegrin government needs to be given a fair chance and the necessary political, technical, and financial support to implement the required reforms to start closing negotiating chapters by the end of 2025. A success in Montenegro would undoubtedly have positive spill-over effects in other Western Balkan countries, foremost in North Macedonia where a new dynamic could be created in the aftermath of the 2024 parliamentary elections, but also in Albania.

There would also be mid-term spill-over effects in Serbia, which in turn would have positive effects on Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

EU member states should also find a legal and political path to respond positively to Kosovo's membership application as soon as possible. While the long-awaited visa liberalisation with Kosovo is a welcome step, without finding a way to positively respond to Kosovo's membership application, the promise of the country's EU perspective remains elusive.

This and the next European Commission need to make sure that the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans succeeds. The logic behind this plan is correct: more financial support, combined with increased integration in the region and with the EU's single market, in return for more and concrete reforms (including on rule of law and difficult political decisions). However, to succeed, the financial aspects need to be sufficiently large, and there must be a credible prospect that governments that do not deliver are left behind.

In parallel, the next European Commission needs to develop a concrete and robust plan for the region's gradual integration with the EU. Money alone will not push reforms in the region forward. This is particularly important if, for any reason, the EU does not take concrete steps to accommodate new members or national elections in EU member states push the EU internal debate against enlargement. In this case, a robust plan for the region's gradual integration with the EU would help keep the EU's leverage in the region as well as push reforms forward.

> *"I would like to see regional political elites understanding the fact that we need to cooperate with each other because of the benefits for the citizens regardless of if we are going to be within the EU or not. We were, we are, and we will always be neighbors. So, we must understand that we need each other, we must cooperate with each other, not because the EU pushes for it or because it's an EU project."* – Donika Emini (Kosovo)

> *"The EU enlargement process must move forward. I see political will on the EU side to have the region moving forward in the process, which maybe was not necessarily the case before. But there is a long way ahead of us. Maybe it takes five, or let's say ten next years, but there is only one way and destination."* – Alba Brojka (Albania)

6. SOCIETIES THAT PROTECT THEIR ENVIRONMENTS

V I S I O N

By 2030, all Western Balkan countries are fully in line with the EU's environmental standards. As a result, the number of premature deaths caused by exposure to air pollution is brought down to the EU average. The region's ability to react to natural disasters is enhanced and fully integrated with the EU. The environmental agenda for the Western Balkans – financially and technically supported by the EU – contributes to economic growth and the creation of jobs. The European Commission extends the "European Green Deal" to include the Western Balkans.

Without breathing oxygen, humans cannot survive for long. Often, however, breathing can also cause premature death through exposure to air pollutants, such as fine particulate matter (PM2.5). In the EU, in 2021, fine particulate matter caused 253,000 premature deaths – a sharp decrease, compared to 391,000 in 2015. But air pollution remains a major health hazard for people in the Western Balkans. According to European Environment Agency (EEA) estimates, this causes 30,000 premature deaths a year.

For the environmental situation in the Western Balkan countries to improve, the region will need to undergo a credible analysis of the current situation. Since 2018, the EEA has, for the first time, included all Western Balkan states in its report on air quality in Europe (see latest 2022 report).

On the basis of this report as well as regular country reports on the level of preparedness for EU membership, the European Commission should offer to all countries in the region a clear roadmap to EU environmental legislation and standards. The region's governments should commit themselves to adopt and implement the entire EU environmental acquis by 2030. In return, the Commission should provide necessary feedback as well as financial and technical support.

At a time when the European continent is confronted with more complex and frequent natural disasters, the capacity of the Western Balkan countries to respond remains far below that of the EU. Many natural disasters in the past six years – such as floods, fires, or even the 2019 earthquake in Albania – showed some improvements but still a major lack of effective cross-border cooperation among the Western Balkan countries as well as with their EU neighbours. Due to their geographic position, these disasters affect not just the region but the EU as well.

It is extremely welcome that, since 2019, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania have joined the EU Civil Protection Mechanism – a system established in 2001 to coordinate rescue and humanitarian assistance

in the event of natural and man-made disasters whose scale or nature exceeds the response capabilities of the affected country. However, as the only country now left out of this mechanism, a legal path for Kosovo to be included should be found as well.

Both the EU and the Western Balkans should step up their efforts to implement the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, considered "the blueprint for a 2050 future of climate neutrality and environmental sustainability. The five-pillar agenda is aligned with the ambitions of the European Green Deal and it relies on urgent regulatory reforms and significant investments."

> *"One very important focus of our work is environment protection. We very quickly found out that it would not be enough to alone work on education of citizens and young people. Yes, the results could come in 15 or 20 years. But all around us we started to notice total devastation of our natural resources, rivers, forests, and soil. So we need to expand our work."* – Tihomir Dakić (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

> *Every winter from Skopje to Sarajevo, we witness how air pollution causes a lot of troubles for citizens, health sector, and economies. People are forced to buy masks or not to go out for certain periods of time. This is something that leads then to different illnesses and premature deaths throughout the region that are higher than the EU average."* – Adnan Ćerimagić (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

7. EMPOWERED CIVIL SOCIETIES AND ENGAGED YOUTH

V I S I O N

By 2030, programs and instruments to empower youth of all genders have expanded significantly. This is achieved through youth mobility programs to facilitate young people's participation in decision-making processes on local, national, and regional levels. All six Western Balkan countries should have free, vibrant, and dynamic civil societies.

Compared to 2019, no improvements have taken place when it comes to empowering civil society and youth across the region. In fact, in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, the environment for civil society has deteriorated.

Young people in the region face many challenges in their countries, including high unemployment rates, low-quality education, and an unsupportive environment for volunteering or participating in activities outside the region. This is due to migration and different socio-economic inequalities. The visa regime between Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina is also an obstacle.

There is also a lack of opportunities for young people and civil society in general to be part of decision-making processes or have a say in policymaking, even when it comes to processes that concern young people directly, such as educational systems.

The full potential of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) needs to be utilized as an independently-functioning institutional mechanism founded by the region's six countries with the aim of increasing youth exchanges through promoting reconciliation, trust, and cooperation.

To identify challenges and overcome future problems related to youth cooperation, Western Balkan countries should survey young people themselves. It is necessary to gain input from young people who have taken part in various mobility programs or other platforms. This would help clarify the benefits but also the drawbacks of these programs and improve their quality.

Young people still lack information about youth cooperation opportunities. It is essential to make this information more accessible in innovative and creative ways. Mobility programs should be made more accessible to people from socio-economically vulnerable backgrounds as well. Moreover, financial issues are another obstacle that prevent young people from being more mobile. In this regard, donors and institutions should revisit the programs that they already support or find a better formula that could make them more inclusive. For example, this might include support for educational mobility incentives and more scholarships.

> *"Young people have a lot of capacity and a lot of ideas. They simply need more trust and more support. Cooperation in a cross-stakeholder approach is possible. It only needs goodwill from all the sides to do as well. Supporting innovative ideas and also supporting needs of young people, when the program is built on their needs and by them, it is also very possible, despite all challenges."* – Irena Topalli (Albania)

> *"I think that youth of all genders should be empowered to become active participants in their societies and communities first, and only then at the regional level. The Western Balkans youth faces lots of challenges every day, starting from the high rate of unemployment and lack of good equality of education, and even different inequalities that they face in their lives. We have seen that lots of regional initiatives aimed at solving these problems, but those were obviously not enough."* – Agnesa Qerimi (Kosovo)

8. MIGRATION WITH BENEFITS

V I S I O N

By 2030, all Western Balkan states have introduced EU-comparable policies on emigration and circular migration. The formal circular migration programs in the Western Balkans attract the region's diaspora, which only a decade earlier had singularly untapped potential as a global asset for the region.

Today, one of the biggest challenges for the Western Balkans is the large number of people leaving the region every year in pursuit of a better life. Every year, thousands leave for other countries – and this often includes some of the region's most educated workforce. The scope of this emigration is best understood when compared to worldwide trends. While globally the percentage of populations living overseas is only about 3 %, in the Western Balkans it is 31,2 %. Such mass emigration has a severe impact on the public sector (health care primarily, but also higher education, science, and public administration). However, what remains unappreciated is that emigration also brings much necessary vigour, the exchange of human capital, the transfer of know-how, and much more.

Evidence shows that many emigrants are willing to contribute to their home countries – in some cases, even returning for a certain period or permanently if conditions back home improve, both socio-economically and politically. Circular migration schemes are rare and often overlook the real potential that diasporas can generate. The Western Balkan countries lack systematic evidence about emigrants and their accompanying skillsets, locations, preferences, and goals. But the available data show that returning emigrants command a 7 % premium in salaries relative to those with similar qualifications and experience who have never lived abroad.

Emigrants from the Western Balkans tend to work hard and are well-regarded by both employers and their host countries, and they possess invaluable qualifications that make them instrumental for the labour market and the economy back home. If policies in the Western Balkans were even partially designed to attract people back home, offering meaningful incentives and decent opportunities, the region would be able to rebuild valuable communities in the short run. Currently, there is very little understanding of where to look for answers on emigration.

Engaging with diasporas is critical not only to help consolidate the region's economic outlook and bring both cutting-edge technologies and know-how to the region, but even more importantly it can profoundly challenge current political narratives and help to bring about much-needed energy and change. Questions like "What are the experiences of emigrants?" "Under which conditions would they

consider returning to the region?" and, ultimately, "What policies could bring a meaningful change in the medium term?" need to be answered. A chronic lack of credible research and solid data on emigration is one of the key impediments to any sound policies or future roadmaps on emigration and circular migration.

To overcome such limitations, Western Balkan governments, along with specialized agencies and their EU counterparts, must commit to comprehensive mid- to long-term continuous research and analysis and explore all aspects of emigration and possibilities to attract their citizens back home. Research results will directly feed into future policies and facilitate the development of the region.

Effective policies that promote circular migration can simplify and foster the region's progress. Moreover, emigration must be part of any high-level EU-Western Balkans agenda, and the governments of the region must both look for complementary policies with the EU and introduce a set of new policies, thus opening opportunities for their citizens.

> *"The question is, what impact could and does diaspora have on the situation in the home countries? This is limited, unfortunately. Individual cases, yes, some very brave and courageous people go back or engage in circular migration. They engage in activities, even in the reconciliation activities. But generally, the diasporas of the Western Balkans don't have a very positive label sticking on it. And in any case, lots to do to make diaspora a productive, constructive, and integral part or positive part of the debates in the region."* – Vedran Džihić (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

> *"I am quite positive on the possibilities that come with migration. But I also think it should consider what does it mean for the home countries out of which they are coming. Because if the home country is losing quality and possibility to develop economically and socially then the migration is not a very good thing."* – Erhard Busek (Austria)

9. CASE STUDY I: NORTH MACEDONIA

V I S I O N

By 2030, North Macedonia, the country that has arguably invested the most in its European future, has become a full member of the EU. Following the adoption of the constitutional reform demanded by Bulgaria, accession negotiations finally began and were concluded at a record pace. North Macedonia benefited from its exemplary preparation for the talks and the swift adoption and implementation of necessary legislation, serving as a role model for other EU candidates in the Western Balkans.

To realize our Vision 2030, it is essential to overcome the deadlock in both the accession process and the domestic political scene in North Macedonia.

The country's EU negotiations began in July 2022 but can only resume after it has amended its constitution to recognize the Bulgarian minority, as stipulated in the EU negotiation framework and an agreement between North Macedonia and Bulgaria reached in June/July 2022. It was a significant concession by the EU to accede to the nationalist demands of Bulgaria, allowing the country to obstruct North Macedonia's path to EU accession.

The constitutional reform, which entails recognizing Bulgarians (and other communities) as an official minority in the country, may not seem particularly extensive on its own. However, given the tense political climate in North Macedonia, the likelihood of the amendments being adopted looks slim. The adoption requires a two-thirds majority in parliament, necessitating approval from parts of the opposition, which is largely dominated by the right-wing nationalist VMRO-DPMNE party.

The country requires a comprehensive consensus on the constitutional amendments and its European trajectory. Parties, particularly the governing SDSM party as well as VMRO-DPMNE, must cooperate for the nation's benefit. The latter must transcend its nationalist agenda and give up its opposition to the constitutional amendments, thereby facilitating the continuation of the country's accession talks.

The EU, its member states, and relevant party factions, especially the European People's Party, should intensify pressure on the responsible policymakers in North Macedonia, particularly on VMRO-DPMNE.

With the upcoming parliamentary elections on 8 May this year, VMRO-DPMNE is anticipated to emerge victorious. Therefore, it will soon be imperative to adopt a constructive approach to pave the way out of the impasse.

In addition to the constitutional amendments, North Macedonia must accelerate reforms across numerous policy areas to fulfil its goal of joining the EU by 2030. This entails reforming the justice system, combating corruption, and addressing organised crime. Furthermore, the country must diligently strive to enhance the competitiveness of its economy in order to align with the standards of the EU's internal market.

The EU must learn from the current deadlock for which it shares responsibility. It should not tolerate individual members states obstructing progress on enlargement due to nationalist considerations, which run counter to vital EU interests.

10. CASE STUDY II: BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

V I S I O N

By 2030, Bosnia and Herzegovina will have implemented all rulings by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and put an end to ethno-nationalist rhetoric. Its citizens will stop separating between ethnic groups and live together under the umbrella of a civic Bosnian and Herzegovinian state. Once ethnicity stops taking precedence over political representation, the country will start to work towards the necessary reforms for joining the EU.

So far, there has been almost no progress in implementing the rulings by the ECHR in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Sejdic-Finci case, brought before the court by Dervo Sejdic and Jakob Finci, who as members of Bosnia's Roma and Jewish communities are barred from running for office, is the most prominent. The country's post-war constitution, which was meant as an ad-hoc solution to end the bloodshed, defined Bosnia and Herzegovina's three 'constituent peoples' – Croats, Bosniaks, and Serbs – which therefore excluded Jews, Roma, and others.

Implementing these judgments will be crucial to ensure a political process built on the basis of human rights, liberal democracy, and the rule of law.

The most recent lawsuit, brought by Slaven Kovacevic, further extended the Sejdic-Finci ruling and pointed out the lack of a policy framework to promote and enforce human rights, including strategies on non-discrimination and the protection of minorities.

The implementation of the ECHR rulings should be put at the center of Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU accession process.

11. CASE STUDY III: THE BELGRADE-PRISTINA DIALOGUE

V I S I O N

By 2030, Serbia and Kosovo will have finished the dialogue process and entered a stage of peaceful neighbourly coexistence. Having put aside all differences and hostilities, the two countries will have found a new modus operandi – all documents will be mutually recognized, the two countries will entertain intensive economic exchange and cooperation, and they will support each other in their EU accession negotiations.

To realize our vision, there is a need for a series of steps to be taken throughout 2024 and 2025 in Serbia and Kosovo. First of all, there is an urgent need in 2024 to de-weaponize the hostile narrative between Serbia and Kosovo. Since the violent attack of Serbian paramilitaries on Banjska in the north of Kosovo in September 2023, Serbia's regime-controlled media have accelerated their campaign against Kosovo, Kosovar Albanians, and Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti. In the first half of 2024, Serbia engaged in a diplomatic campaign to prevent Kosovo from joining the Council of Europe. Both sides urgently need to return to the content of the Ohrid Agreement from 2023 and start a new round of negotiations under new leadership on the EU side (including the Western Balkans representative and the new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy). For Serbia, this will require a stop to the policy of blocking Kosovo's participation in international institutions, while for Kosovar authorities this will require the creation of the Assembly of Serbian Municipalities and a renewed honest effort to reach out to the Serbian community in Kosovo in an effort to end negative sentiments towards them and integrate them into the Kosovar state and society.

In parallel, it is of utmost importance to ensure a secure environment in Kosovo, which the strengthening of the operational capabilities of NATO's KFOR. Only if the region can avoid further violence between Serbia and Kosovo can both states be firmly anchored within the EU in the future.

In the meantime and following its elections in June 2024, the EU should undertake a major internal effort to introduce reforms to its enlargement policy, mainly including qualified majority voting. The EU should in parallel look for creative ways to engage with its five members who do not recognize Kosovo to be able to give Kosovo the status of official EU candidate country and start accession negotiations as soon as possible.

OUR OUTPUTS

I N T E R V I E W S

1. Adnan Cerimagic   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (30 November 2018)
2. Dafina Peci   (Albania)   (30 November 2018)
3. Dona Kosturanova   (North Macedonia)   (30 November 2018)
4. Christina Kolouri   (Greece)   (30 November 2018)
5. Tanja Fajon   (Slovenia)   (30 November 2018)
6. Djordje Bojovic   (Serbia)   (12 December 2018)
7. Stefani Spriovska   (North Macedonia)   (30 April 2019)
8. Nikola Burazer   (Serbia)   (30 April 2019)
9. Hannes Swoboda   (Austria)   (2 May 2019)
10. Tara Tepavac   (Serbia)   (2 May 2019)
11. Vedran Dzihic   (Austria)   (6 May 2019)
12. Max Brändle   (Germany)   (6 May 2019)
13. Adnan Cerimagic   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (14 May 2019)
14. Djordje Bojovic   (Serbia)   (14 May 2019)
15. Gerhard Marchl   (Austria)   (14 May 2019)
16. Stefani Spirovska   (North Macedonia)   (2 October 2019)
17. Mario Mazic   (Croatia)   (3 October 2019)
18. Djordje Bojovic   (Serbia)   (3 October 2019)
19. Agnesa Qerimi   (Kosovo)   (7 October 2019)
20. Vuk Velebit   (Serbia)   (14 October 2019)
21. Hannes Swoboda   (Austria)   (17 October 2019)
22. Adnan Cerimagic   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (21 October 2019)
23. Frank Hantke   (Germany)   (21 October 2019)
24. Gentiola Madhi   (Albania)   (24 October 2019)
25. Donika Emini   (Kosovo)   (24 October 2019)
26. Hannes Swoboda   (Austria)   (27 March 2020)
27. Maja Bjelos   (Serbia)   (3 April 2020)
28. Dafina Peci   (Albania)   (3 April 2020)
29. Anja Jokic   (Serbia)   (3 April 2020)
30. Hannes Swoboda   (Austria)   (10 April 2020)
31. Aulone Memeti   (Kosovo)   (10 April 2020)
32. Anja Jokic   (Serbia)   (10 April 2020)
33. Djordje Bojovic   (Serbia)   (16 April 2020)
34. Adnan Cerimagic   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (16 April 2020)
35. Ajla Borozan   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (6 November 2020)
36. Tihomir Dakic   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (10 November 2020)
37. Lejla Kusturica   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (10 November 2020)
38. Emina Bosnjak   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (12 November 2020)
39. Amila Karcic   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (16 November 2020)
40. Irma Baralija   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (16 November 2020)
41. Leila Bicakcic   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (16 November 2020)
42. Ilija Tninic   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (27 November 2020)
43. Vuk Velebit   (Serbia)   (12 March 2021)

44. Andreas Schieder   (Austria)   (26 May 2021)
45. Hannes Swoboda   (Austria)   (5 July 2021)
46. Hannes Swoboda   (Austria)   (13 July 2021)
47. Vedran Dzihic   (Austria)   (14 July 2021)
48. Vesna Pusic   (Croatia)   (19 July 2021)
49. Adnan Cerimagic   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (21 July 2021)
50. Erhard Busek   (Austria)   (27 July 2021)
51. Goran Svilanovic   (Serbia)   (29 July 2021)
52. Hannes Swoboda   (Austria)   (3 August 2021)
53. Mario Mazic   (Croatia)   (5 August 2021)
54. Wolfgang Petritsch   (Austria)   (10 August 2021)
55. Sabina Cehajic-Clancy   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (12 August 2021)
56. Donika Emini   (Kosovo)   (17 August 2021)
57. Ulrike Lunacek   (Austria)   (19 August 2021)
58. Florian Bieber   (Austria)   (26 August 2021)
59. Christina Koulouri   (Greece)   (31 August 2021)
60. Maja Bjelos   (Serbia)   (7 September 2021)
61. Luka Cekic   (Austria)   (9 September 2021)
62. Laura Crnic   (Croatia)   (21 December 2021)
63. Hannes Swoboda   (Austria)   (21 December 2021)
64. Maja Bjelos   (Serbia)   (21 December 2021)
65. Gerhard Marchl   (Austria)   (21 December 2021)
66. Dennis Miskic   (Austria)   (21 December 2021)
67. Stephanie Fenkart   (Austria)   (21 December 2021)
68. Samir Beharic   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (21 December 2021)
69. Vilson Blloshmi   (Albania)   (21 December 2021)
70. Adnan Cerimagic   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (21 December 2021)
71. Djordje Bojovic   (Serbia)   (14 March 2022)
72. Adnan Cerimagic   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (14 March 2022)
73. Dennis Miskic   (Austria)   (3 August 2022)
74. Hannes Swoboda   (Austria)   (10 August 2022)
75. Almasa Salihovic   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (25 August 2022)
76. Amra Begic   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (7 September 2022)
77. Hasan Hasanovic   (Bosnia & Herzegovina)   (7 September 2022)
78. Srdjan Barasin   (Austria)   (7 October 2022)
79. Vedran Dzihic   (Austria)   (7 October 2022)
80. Larissa Lojic   (Austria)   (7 October 2022)
81. Dennis Miskic   (Austria)   (7 October 2022)
82. Ivan Vejvoda   (Serbia)   (6 November 2022)
83. Vladimir Bilcik   (Slovakia)   (13 December 2022)
84. Donika Emini   (Kosovo)   (13 December 2022)
85. Andreas Schieder   (Austria)   (13 December 2022)
86. Andrey Kovatchev   (Bulgaria)   (13 December 2022)
87. Vuk Velebit   (Serbia)   (12 March 2023)
88. Nikola Burazer   (Serbia)   (12 March 2023)
89. Ksenija Markovic   (Serbia)   (12 March 2023)
90. Maja Bjelos   (Serbia)   (12 March 2023)

91. Anita Bonacic   (Croatia)   (19 July 2023)
92. Albert Hani   (Albania)   (19 July 2023)
93. Alba Brojka   (Albania)   (19 July 2023)
94. Kostian Jano   (Albania)   (19 July 2023)
95. Klara Luku   (Albania)   (19 July 2023)
96. Klajdi Kaziu   (Albania)   (19 July 2023)
97. Fabjola Ndoj   (Albania)   (19 July 2023)
98. Brooklyn Shima   (Albania)   (19 July 2023)
99. Besmira Lekaj   (Albania)   (19 July 2023)
100. Matea Mojas   (Croatia)   (19 July 2023)
101. Tonino Picula   (Croatia)   (19 July 2023)

P A N E L S

1. European Alternatives for the Western Balkans Youth 2030: Education, Reconciliation and Social Equality (Vienna, Austria) (14 January 2019)
2. What future for the youth in the Western Balkans? (Vienna, Austria) (28 October 2019)
3. Young Generations for the New Balkans: Vision 2030 (Tirana, Albania) (20 February 2020)
4. Post Covid or Post Democracy Balkans? Political turmoil in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia (Vienna, Austria) (5 June 2020)
5. Post-Covid or Post-Democracy Balkans? State of human rights, media freedoms, and civil liberties (Vienna, Austria) (17 June 2020)
6. Post-Covid or Post-Democracy Balkans? Solidarity within the region and beyond (Vienna, Austria) (22 June 2020)
7. Post-Covid or Post-Democracy Balkans? What future for the region? A Discussion with Goran Svilanović (Vienna, Austria) (29 June 2020)
8. Post-Covid or Post-Democracy Balkans? Transitional Justice and Reconciliation after the Pandemic (Vienna, Austria) (6 July 2020)
9. The Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue. Can an agreement finally be reached? (Vienna, Austria) (23 July 2020)
10. Bosnian and Herzegovinian Peace Agreement turns 25 - PART I (Vienna, Austria) (26 November 2020)
11. Bosnian and Herzegovinian Peace Agreement turns 25 - PART II (Vienna, Austria) (11 January 2021)
12. What Future for Kosovo? Reflection on the Election Results (Vienna, Austria) (22 February 2021)
13. IIP TALK - What Future for Albania? Reflection on the Election Results (Vienna, Austria) (4 May 2021)
14. IIP TALK: The Slovenian EU-Presidency and its implications for the Western Balkan Region (Vienna, Austria) (1 July 2021)
15. RECONCILIATION: 30 Years since the Breakup of Yugoslavia (Vienna, Austria) (6 July 2021)
16. Bosnia and Herzegovina's Political Crisis: Are Words Going to Stay the Only Weapon? (Vienna, Austria) (24 February 2022)
17. Serbia at a Geopolitical Crossroads (Belgrade, Serbia) (15 March 2022)
18. How to deal with the threat of Authoritarianism? (Vienna, Austria) (7 April 2022)
19. Die Westbalkan-Diaspora: Verantwortung – Rolle – Zugehörigkeit (Vienna, Austria) (4 May 2022)
20. IIP Talk with Adnan Cerimagic - Revitalizing the EU Perspective for the Western Balkans (Vienna, Austria) (21 June 2022)
21. IIP TALK with Glauk Konjufca, President of the Parliament of Kosovo and Hannes Swoboda (Vienna, Austria) (11 August 2022)
22. Kosovo's visa liberalization: Can we hope for progress soon? (Vienna, Austria) (20 September 2022)

23. Upcoming Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina - Results, Prospects, and EU Integration (Vienna, Austria) (29 September 2022)
24. Kosovo: 15 Years of Independence (Vienna, Austria) (24 February 2023)
25. Zoran Djindjic's Legacy & Serbia's Never-ending Transition (Vienna, Austria) (12 March 2023)

PUBLICATIONS

1. Beyond Emigration, towards Alternative Horizons: Young Generation for the New Balkans (November 2018)
2. Vision 2030: Towards Alternative Horizons – Report Brussels (December 2019)
3. Vision 2030: Towards Alternative Horizons (December 2019)
4. Bosnia & Herzegovina: On the path back to conflict or to progressive reforms? (December 2021)
5. Serbia at a Geopolitical Crossroads (April 2022)
6. Vienna declaration on dealing with authoritarianism: United for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (April 2022)

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In this project, young people from all six Western Balkan countries participated in meetings, brainstorming sessions, and public events. This paper was drafted by a group of these participants but reflects many of the discussions and ideas that have emerged since the project was first launched.

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- Agim Selami, North Macedonia
- Mak Kasapovic, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Alba Brojka, Albania
- Vilson Blloshmi, Albania
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