

REPORT

Western Balkans integration process: State of play in 2017

Wednesday 18th of October 2017, 15:30 – 17:30
European Parliament, Room ASP 3F383

- **The event took place in the European Parliament on October 18th, 2017, organized by the Think Visegrad Platform in cooperation with Mr. Eduard Kukan, Member of the European Parliament (EPP). The debate sought to fill in the space voided by the European Commission, which due to its changed schedule decided to publish the annual Progress Report on Western Balkans only in April 2018, and evaluate the progress achieved in the Western Balkans so far. More than 60 people participated in the discussion, with 7 MEPs and several journalists among them.**

The debate was opened by **Mr. Eduard Kukan**, who highlighted the importance of the State of the Union speech by President Juncker for the Western Balkan region, but warned that this momentum can easily fade away if actions do not follow. Subsequently Mr. Kukan raised 3 main questions – what is the state of play of the Western Balkans accession process, what the most important achievements were since the publication of the last Progress Report and what development are expected in the foreseeable future.

Building on those questions, the event's moderator, **Mr. Tomáš Strážay** from the SFPA, passed on the floor to the first panellist, **Mr. Dušan Reljić** from the SWP in Brussels. Mr. Reljić argued that the countries of the Western Balkans are economically already deeply integrated in the European Common Market, illustrating it on the example of the banking sector. Since the countries lack any of the benefits of the EU membership, Mr. Reljić suggested that the EU should consider opening the structural funds to the Western Balkans for compensation and include

the region to the European security infrastructure. Otherwise, Mr. Reljić warned, the region might face an implosion that could result in yet another destabilization and consequent migration wave.

Ms. Marta Szpala of the OSW also noted that the Juncker's 2017 SOTEU created a certain momentum, however pointed out that at the same time, Western Balkans experiences many internal processes that result in rather autocratic regimes. As the EU policy towards the region has been leader-driven lately, the EU doesn't sufficiently criticize leaders who openly breach the values that the EU tries to promote. Ms. Szpala also warned that the institution building, the biggest deficiency in the region, is meanwhile lacking behind.

Next to speak was **Ms. Anna Orosz** from the IFAT. She followed up on Mrs. Szpala's comments and pointed out the decreasing credibility of the EU as a main problem in the accession process. Ms. Orosz highlighted that the EU should pick upon the positive developments and not waste any time, otherwise the often unbalanced societies of the Western Balkans might face political turmoil. She also remarked that the momentum can be kept by the current and future presidencies – the Hungarian presidency of the V4 and the upcoming Bulgarian and Romanian presidencies in the Council.

Last to take the floor was **Mr. Ján Cingel** of GLOBSEC. He stressed that the current credibility of the EU is also undermined by a different set of

conditions for each state – those should be unified in order to keep the process transparent.

The second round of questions tackled the attitudes of EU states/regions towards the Western Balkan region. According to Mr. Reljić, **Germany will remain the main driving force behind the enlargement process**, whatever the new coalition government will be. Ms. Szpala highlighted Poland's determination to promote regional cooperation in the region, while Ms. Orosz mentioned the importance of the V4 states in promoting the Western Balkans in the EU and engaging in regional cooperation. Mr. Cingel then concluded the debate by saying that **the only problem of the V4 approach to the region is that not all the members are part of the Berlin process**, which should be way more inclusive.

The next ones to take the floor were the MEPs. **Mr. Cristian Dan Preda**, Rapporteur for Bosnia and Herzegovina, presented the latest developments in the country and concluded that these developments provide little to be happy about, especially given the very long election campaign. **Mr. Igor Soltes**, in-coming Rapporteur for Kosovo, agreed with Mr. Reljić's proposal to treat the Western Balkan countries as a part of the EU. **Mr. Alojz Peterle**, Chair of the Delegation to the EU-former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee, remarked that the EU should refrain from labelling any country as a "leading"

one, as it is counterproductive and humiliates the others in the process. He then concluded that as of now, Western Balkans do not present an important element in the EU thinking about its future, but this could easily change if the topic is neglected.

The event was closed by the Director-General of DG NEAR, **Mr. Christian Danielsson**. He highlighted that the EU's approach to the Western Balkans region is now different than in the past 3 years – namely after the March conclusions of the European Council, SOTEU 2017 and also the latest speech by President Macron. Another driving force for the change was then the migration wave, where the EU realized that it sees the Western Balkan countries as a long-term ally

and part of the solution, and many questions of security need to be tackled together. Last but not least, **the EU still sees more and more the region as a potential market**. He concluded that with several key events coming up (namely the Communication expected in February 2018, Progress Report in April and Summit in May), together with upcoming presidencies close to the region, **Western Balkans has a good chance to stay high on the EU's political agenda**. However, he remarked, the quality of reforms on the ground and consistency on the side of the EU are key elements of success. Mr. Danielsson therefore **called on the Member States to keep the momentum and engage more in public diplomacy in the region**.