

EU and the Western Balkans: Addressing together challenges and using opportunities –

Report on the 6th EPP/KAS Group Conference on the Western Balkans

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More than 14 years after the Thessaloniki Agenda in which European heads of state and government stated that the future of the Balkans is within the European Union, most of the countries of south-eastern Europe find themselves in an increasingly uncertain situation: Progress in good governance and the rule of law has been deficient; economic development is uneven; ethnic tensions are growing. Russian as well as other actors' influence is growing while mutual recriminations about the past and unsolved problems inhibit stronger regional cooperation.

For those reasons, progress towards EU accession in recent years has been very slow. On the other hand, the rise of populism inside the EU as well as general criticism towards European integration is causing EU leaders to suspend any further concrete announcements regarding accession. Nonetheless, current difficulties should not lead to a standstill in cooperation between the EU and its south-eastern partners. This having said, the long term vision for the whole region requires stronger engagement.

Against this background, the European Office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the Group of the European People's Party (EPP) in the European Parliament (EP) were hosting a conference on the relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans. The event was organized by Mariya Gabriel MEP, Vice-Chair of the EPP group. Our two panels aimed to address current challenges and outline common opportunities. Speakers

from within the EU highly agreed that the Western Balkans have to deliver on their commitments, while the EU must assist them in the most efficient way.

In her statement, Mariya Gabriel appealed to the political will of the partners in the Western Balkans to advance on the European path. She highlighted the EU will do everything possible to help and assist the respective states on that path. Joseph Daul, EPP President, pointed out that the EU had to give the same opportunities and chances to the Western Balkans as it has done to its nowadays Eastern member states after the end of communism. Every country on the European continent which is sharing the EU's values should be offered a credible perspective to become a member of the club. In addition, the situation in the Western Balkans was in the interest of the EU itself, according to Daul, mainly due to geopolitical and security concerns. However, recent developments regarding democracy, the rule of law, fair elections and corruption are giving evidence that there still is a long way to go.

Joseph Daul concluded by saying that every country in the Western Balkans had to be judged on an individual basis according to its merits and with regard to its political and institutional developments. He was joined by Elmar Brok, former chairman of the EP Committee on Foreign Affairs, who stated that the chances for accession currently for most of those countries were less favorable than they had been a couple of years ago. In order to really have a restart, both partners had to agree on common principles and concrete steps. On the other hand, Ni-

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kola Gruevski, former prime minister of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, reminded the Western Europeans that the process of accession had to be credible and that the candidate countries had to have a concrete perspective for joining the EU. Otherwise, he stated, it would be difficult to win over their population for this process.

Our two panels were mainly focusing on good governance and the art of compromise as well as on regional cooperation and security issues. Many panelists stated that the EU will not be completed until the states from the Western Balkans were in. However, they agreed that new and more mutual trust and confidence between the partners is needed. Participants from Croatia reminded that it took their country eight years to fulfil all the political and technical criteria for accession – the so-called ‘Copenhagen criteria’. This having said, the process of accession can be long and tough but what is indispensable is the perspective for accession to be credible and realistic. Regarding regional cooperation and security, Jadranka Joksimović, minister without Portfolio responsible for European integration in the Government of Serbia, argued in favor of a new, innovative and convincing communication strategy, both in the EU member states and in the candidate states. Political leaders in all countries should communicate that the EU still was the best and safest place to live and work in.

Johannes Hahn, European Commissioner for Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, reaffirmed the EPP’s strong commitments to enhance the dialogue between the EU and the states from the Western Balkans. Any vision of a future Europe had to have a European perspective of the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, Commissioner Hahn was insisting on the need for those countries to implement necessary reforms. The EPP, on their part, as stated in the Emergency Resolution adopted at its Congress in Malta on 29 and 30 March 2017, commits to assist its partners in the reform process and to support their aspiration towards EU membership when all necessary requirements are fulfilled.