

## **Outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe - styled discussion with young leaders from the Western Balkans**

### **European Democracy Youth Network and Strategic Analysis Think Tank**

#### **COMMUNIQUÉ**

The Western Balkan countries have been seeking European Union membership for several years now. Unfortunately, the region's history with past conflicts - some of which are still disputed today - has severely impacted its European integration prospects.

Crucially, while previous generations waged wars and refrained from cooperation, their children and grandchildren have decided to move forward and overcome the grave legacy of their past with the aim of ultimately obtaining membership in the European Union.

Based on discussions with young generations of leaders from the Western Balkans, the research project led by Strategic Analysis has identified key obstacles and recommended actions to advance the Western Balkans' efforts to achieve European Union membership.

#### **The EU is losing momentum in the Balkans as it is failing to deliver on its promises**

According to young people from the Western Balkans, the EU has been losing momentum in the region. This is certainly not a new complaint, however, never before have the consequences seemed as serious as now. At the same time that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has severely impacted the Western Balkans' security architecture, the EU has been losing its credibility due to unfulfilled promises. This includes Brussels' failure to liberalize visas for Kosovo's citizens, despite the fact that the country fulfilled all the necessary criteria in 2018. Moreover, Brussels' delays in opening the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia over the latter's conflict with neighboring Bulgaria have also added to the perception that the EU's involvement in the region has been inadequate. This is further exacerbated by perceptions that the EU was unfairly siding with Bulgaria vis-à-vis North Macedonia.

These missteps have accidentally empowered domestic populists and external authoritarian actors, such as Russia and China. Moscow, in particular, has been remarkably active through its proxies in the Balkan region – using disinformation campaigns to stir tensions in the EU’s immediate neighborhood to distract it from the on-the-ground reality of the invasion of Ukraine.

The region’s young, pro-democracy leaders believe that the EU should, out of principle, deliver on its promises, including the visa liberalization of Kosovo’s citizens, granting candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and, finally, unblocking the negotiation process with Serbia, Montenegro, and especially North Macedonia. Moreover, the EU should take a much stricter stance against Russia’s proxies in the Western Balkans – which are endangering Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, as well as Montenegro. Brussels should deploy European hybrid threats specialists to the aforementioned Balkan countries, which would help them establish more adequate defense measures.

## **The Brain Drain as a strategic threat**

Young generations from the Western Balkans recognize the outflow of educated young people from the region as the second most significant problem. Each Western Balkan country has lost between two to six hundred thousand young people who have moved over the past decade. Corruption, clientelism, nepotism, and the lack of professional opportunities have pushed young experts with skills, knowledge, and the motivation to help their countries to leave them.

Consequently, not enough professionals can contribute to the success of the EU’s accession process and the region’s overall development. To change this, young leaders suggest, on the one hand, creating more job opportunities in the region and, on the other, to tackle corruption, nepotism, and clientelism more seriously.

The young leaders we interviewed suggest doubling the amount of Foreign Direct Investments from EU countries, which would, on the one hand, increase the number of compelling job opportunities in the region while, on the other hand, strengthen the EU’s business culture of responsibility, equal opportunities, rule of law, and anti-corruption.

Furthermore, the EU should consider establishing an Erasmus Plus-like scheme for young people from the Western Balkans that would offer at least 10.000 new scholarships and/or loans for young people from the region to complete their full studies in EU countries.

This would extend beyond university-level education and include vocational training, too. The loans would have to be paid after students graduate. However, if a young person returns to their home country and starts working there, the loan would be annulled. This would, on the one hand, increase the qualification of the workforce in the region, and, on the other hand, motivate young, knowledgeable people to return back and establish their work and lives in the region.

## **Young people – the future of the Western Balkans**

The fact that young generations are the future of the Western Balkans is not a cliché. Young people are ready to move on and focus on their shared future. Their motivations are idealistic as well as pragmatic. They may not agree on their shared past, but they are ready to look to the future. As such, they should be looked upon as the primary agents of change for the whole region. Even though structural social, economic, and political issues seriously affect the Western Balkans, young people have the potential to address them, thereby helping their respective governments achieve EU membership.

However, to do so, they need support. The Western Balkans can't be an example of a failed EU accession process. Therefore, Brussels should focus more on the region and call upon regional politicians to create the conditions for young and motivated people to seize the opportunity to shape their countries' future in the European Union as soon as possible. It is on us to provide young people with the possibility to make it happen.

## BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

In parallel to ongoing discussions within the framework of the European Commission's Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), the European Democracy Youth Network (EDYN) and the Strategic Analysis (SA) think tank have organized a series of focus groups with young leaders across the Western Balkans, Moldova, Ukraine (as of September 2022), and Georgia to capture their perspective on their countries' Euro-Atlantic integration and the Future of Europe. EDYN and SA seek to amplify young people's voices vis-à-vis EU officials to present a new narrative of a shared future in the name of peace and cooperation.

### **About the European Democracy Youth Network (EDYN)**

EDYN is a coalition of young pro-democracy leaders, civic activists, politicians, and journalists, aged 18 to 32, across 23 countries who are committed to advancing the democratic dialogue and sustaining democratic values through their political and civic activities while growing their professional skills and experience. Although they differ in their political views, EDYN members are committed to working together to defend freedom, support fundamental human rights, and safeguard democratic progress. EDYN supports those who refrain from the politics of hate and divisiveness in order to unite their societies against authoritarian threats and extremists.

### **About Strategic Analysis Think Tank**

Strategic Analysis is an independent think tank providing up-to-date expertise for public institutions, the private sector, the media, and civil society. Based in Slovakia, Strategic Analysis focuses primarily on the European Neighborhood with a particular emphasis on the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries. The Strategic Analysis Think Tank's team combines over twelve years of experience working and networking across the Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries.