

The Future of Europe. The Challenges of Growing Anti-Europeanism and Authoritarianism in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Views from the region

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The webinar explored the illiberal tendencies, growing authoritarianism, and anti-EU feelings within some Member States and European neighbouring countries, referring to the impact on the EU's external credibility and influence in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Keynote Speaker:

- **H.E. Oana-Cristina POPA**, Ambassador of the European Union in Montenegro.

Discussants:

- **Milena LAZAREVIĆ**, Programme Director, European Policy Centre, Republic of Serbia;
- **Ludmila NOFIT**, ESEE Fanel Network member, Deputy Director, Foreign Policy Association, Republic of Moldova.

Moderator: Professor **Liliana POPESCU**, PhD, Vice-Rector for International Relations, SNSPA, Romania.

Bringing the European Union closer to the people by reflecting on its future

H.E. Oana-Cristina Popa highlighted the participatory character of the debate on the future of the European Union, which will not be determined only by high-level decision-makers and the European institutions. The citizens will have as much input as the EU institutional structures and Member States decision factors.

Considering the current Conference on the future of Europe, a few policies and pillars can be identified:

- **Youth.** Without the youth, we cannot speak about Europe's future, since the youth of today are going to be the leaders of tomorrow. Therefore, young people need to be involved in a more proactive manner, moving from the status of beneficiary of European policies to makers of European policies. We see nowadays much effort put into involving the youth in the current debate.
- **Gender.** Even though much is said about bridging the gap between theory and practice of gender balance, little has been done about it. The EU has been working on raising awareness on gender balance and applied it into policies, but more efforts are needed. There are still significant discrepancies between member states regarding gender equality, both in terms of how this area is understood and the specific policies are

approached, but the future of Europe must be able to close the gender gap and build efficient policies to this end.

- **Green policies.** Since climate change is one of the biggest challenges of the 21st century, green policies are already being implemented at the European and global levels. The European Union aims to become climate neutral by 2050, and in this sense, it has adopted massive policy packages. The full green transition needed will not be achieved solely by making changes at the sectoral level, it has to be done across the continent because climate change transcends national borders. The behaviour of the states – both current and future Member States, as well as EU partners – is crucial in accomplishing full green transition.
- **Digitalisation.** As the pandemic has proven, digitalisation is currently one of the most important components of our lives. Because the digital transition is an issue that knows no boundaries, the future of Europe must be digitalized.

All of these policies have an impact on people's lives, and if properly addressed and implemented, they may significantly enhance living conditions. EU must work together to achieve successful implantation of the above-mentioned pillars, through proper connectivity.

In terms of cooperation between the European Union and regional partners, the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans focuses on strengthening regional connectivity and connecting countries to the European Union by building transportation infrastructure and economic facilities to ensure the green and digital transition, including the perspective of the post-pandemic recovery, with initial funding of 9 billion Euro and investments of up to 20 billion Euro. This is especially important since, both geographically and socially, the Western Balkans have always been a part of Europe, which should be taken into account while conducting membership discussions. The EU's ongoing enlargement negotiations have again demonstrated the EU's enduring commitment to the Western Balkans, but the countries themselves must demonstrate that the European attitude is fully embraced at the national level in an organized and meaningful manner.

“The future of Europe is young, female, green, and digital!”

H.E. Ambassador Oana-Cristina POPA

Milena Lazarević considers herself one of the staunch supporters of Serbia's accession and integration into the European Union. While Croatia achieved its goal of becoming a member of the EU in 2012, for Serbia it seems that this target moved further away. In the past years, Serbia has experienced a steady decline in democracy, which has morphed into authoritarianism, although it may be praised for having a female Prime-Minister, the real decision-making power lies elsewhere.

According to the Nations in Transit report by the Freedom House, Serbia is now classified as a hybrid government, rather than a semi-consolidated democracy as some former communist EU Member States. In addition, the absence of female leadership might be described as a result of the democratic decline, as shown by studies and researches conducted by various think tanks and established scholars. The prolonged process of EU accession, at some point, explicitly halted, determined a de-prioritisation of this policy in the EU and a “reform fatigue”, which is, in fact, the unwillingness of the political elites to undertake the most sensitive reforms.

Currently, we are witnessing a renewed focus on the enlargement, as shown by the more dynamic interactions, as well as by the priority given to the Western Balkans by France in the programme for its 2022 Presidency of the EU Council. This leads to the question of whether the national political elites are convinced that the EU is serious about enlargement and therefore they need to implement real reforms to show their commitment.



“The EU needs to take creative and bold decisions beyond the new enlargement methodology, to pursue a much more active agenda towards the Western Balkans and show its commitment to fully integrate these countries within a decade.”

Milena LAZAREVIĆ

Ludmila Nofit asserted that the EU accession prospects of the Republic of Moldova are even lower than those of Serbia. Nevertheless, the 15 December 2021 Eastern Partnership summit gave new impetus, by recognizing the Association Trio format (Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine), and may further consolidate their commitments to reforms, leading to a future consideration for potential membership.

For a better understanding of the current situation, attitudes from governmental institutions and the cultural and social system perspectives need to be taken into consideration. In the past, politicians’ narrow points of view and their anti-EU propaganda rendered the society more susceptible and fragmented based on geopolitical options, which resulted in democratic backsliding. Furthermore, serious corruption problems represented the main cause for keeping the Republic of Moldova far from the European Union. Nowadays the Republic of Moldova enjoys a favourable political climate, with a commitment to the European Union and a pro-reform leadership, moving away from political isolation. The current government is looking to improve and strengthen the state’s resilience through effective reform implementation.

The cultural and social attitude is characterized by the divided positions found in citizens’ thoughts and beliefs. The traditional values are used by the officials in their public discourses during election campaigns to limit the political participation of women or to counter legislative initiatives aimed at building a more inclusive society, such as the case of the anti-discrimination law. In this context,

it is important to communicate and stimulate the critical thinking of the citizens, since the hostility towards ethnic and religious minorities or the LGBT community is artificially increased by the political leaders.

In terms of gender equality, it is worthwhile to mention that the political participation of women has increased over the past years, with 35% of candidates and 25% of elected members of Parliament being women. Nevertheless, women's role is underestimated and they are still not perceived as political and social leaders. Additionally, the pandemic has increased the gender gap in economic and social terms, calling for a commitment to bridging this gap in post-pandemic recovery. In this sense, the countries must learn from this crisis, take an assertive role with a massive effort, at all levels, to improve the system so that it can better prevent and respond to new challenges.



“For the Republic of Moldova, it is important to strengthen its resilience against the illiberal tendencies and the anti-EU sentiments, which pose a serious threat to democracy at a global level.”

Ludmila NOFIT

The European Union faced with emerging multipolarity: challenges and responses in the region

H.E. Ambassador Oana-Cristina Popa highlighted that polarization is a significant challenge at the European, regional and national levels. The phenomenon is not unique to the Western Balkans and it was given a new dimension by the pandemic, through disinformation and fake news. To overcome it, besides a need for dialogue and for bridging the gap, the European Union has undertaken concrete measures through specific programmes and financial packages placing the citizens at the centre of its efforts. One such example is the Pre-Accession Instrument (IPA) 2021-2027 for the Western Balkans, which was approved in September 2021, amounting to 4 billion euros.

The European Union is working hard to become more accessible, to go beyond technical jargon and to get people on board with its policies by improving the understanding of the information made available in this regard. While there is widespread dissatisfaction in the region with the slow pace of EU accession, we must remember the EU's previous large expansion, which required an internal adaptation process, as well as the political and societal commitment to deliver on their obligations to reforms in accordance with EU rules and values.

Milena Lazarević acknowledged the increased complexity of the EU decision-making process as a result of the previous enlargements. Nevertheless, there is growing concern, as shown by research and opinion polls, that a large majority of Serbian citizens believe that Serbia will never become a

member of the European Union. While there has indeed been a lack of political will on the part of political leaders to implement reforms, the disillusionment in the population is stemming both from domestic and European factors.

The civil society and think tank community require the European Union's assistance in promoting a more structured and nuanced communication to the population, with the goal of emphasizing the Western Balkans' membership in the European Union and providing accessible information on concrete mechanisms and targets. Furthermore, communication to the leadership must be separated and not viewed as a sign of society's support for the European road, in order to clearly define the political elite's obligation to enact changes and hold them accountable.

Ludmila Nofit reiterated the need to learn the lessons from the various events and situations leading to increased disillusionment with the European Union among the population. Since a significant part of the problems come from the domestic level, there is a need for strengthening resilience at the level of the state through stable democratic institutions, independent justice, accountable public officials and strong leadership.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

We are now dealing with major difficulties relating to malign influences aimed at derailing the EU integration, which necessitates state and societal resilience, as well as a stronger EU accession package. **Polarization, along with other very alarming developments such as the growth of Euroscepticism and nationalism, may be countered by collaborating toward the objective of EU integration. The European Union should continue its efforts to develop its public diplomacy in order to improve the population's understanding of the broad impact of its activities and to fight anti-European attitudes.**

The European Union has been countering the narratives that undermine the EU's perceptions and prospects at the societal levels. **We must devise a method to guarantee that we do not unwittingly and accidentally encourage the same autocratic inclinations that we all wish to combat. Such a solution might be the maintaining of separate communication lines with the political leadership and the society are needed in order awareness about those accountable for the reform delays, which in turn would reduce the local polarization.**

Resilience and value-based leadership are the keywords of the European strategies, which should be translated into concrete actions at the level of the states and in the European Union programmes for the region. **Besides strengthening regional cooperation, state institutions should cooperate closely with all stakeholders at the national level – civil society, the business environment, media outlets, and academia – to share best practices and lessons learned in their reform efforts. The existing structures of collaboration with the European Union should be enhanced with short-term targets that must be evaluated regularly and maintained flexible to address new threats and challenges.**