

REPORT

Reconciliation in Visegrad and the Western Balkans: Overcoming the Past Together

Thursday 21st January 2020

Leopold Hotel Brussels

- **On January 21, 2020, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy hosted an event within the project titled "From Warsaw to Tirana: Overcoming the past together". The program of the event was divided into two parts. During the first part, experts from the partner institutions of the project, financially supported by the International Visegrad Fund, presented their case studies on the reconciliation processes in Visegrad and Western Balkans countries. Second part, which was organized as a panel discussion, focused on the question how to enhance the reconciliation process in the Western Balkans.**

On behalf of partnering institutions, **Jana Juzová**, Research Fellow at EUROPEUM, started by welcoming the guests, introduced the structure of the project and explained its goals and purposes. She later gave the floor to **Tomáš Strážay** (Director of SFP, author of Slovak-Hungarian reconciliation case study) who stressed the importance of strengthening bilateral relations, treaties and international cooperation as a base for good cooperation. He also pointed out that the implementation is the most important phase as treaties only present instruments, which need to be used. In his opinion, Slovaks and Hungarians still have homework to do, for example to create a body acting as a bilateral council potentially accompanied by a bilateral fund, which would strengthen the reconciliation process. Greater respect for minorities is needed, while the governments should use some symbolic instruments to encourage the minority communities to identify with the countries they live in.

Anna Orosz (Research Fellow at IFAT) proceeded with the presentation of her case study focusing on the reconciliation between Hungarians and Serbs and added

her insights on the process. She underlined that inclusion of minority rights is necessary for the finalization of the reconciliation. According to Orosz, initiatives made by Serb government to align the legal framework with EU standards are crucial not only for Hungary, but also for another EU member state, Croatia. There are positive improvements in the rhetoric after the changes of governments in both countries in early 2010's. Much stronger economic relations between the governments are also enhancing the process of reconciliation. Moreover, minority councils, cultural and educational rights are provided nowadays, although there is still work to be done to lay a sustainable ground for cooperation.

Author of the last presented case study, dealing with the reconciliation process between Serbia and Albania, **Jelica Minić** (President of the European Movement in Serbia) explained that the relations between Serbia and Albania as countries are actually rather good, but there is a different story when it comes to ethnic groups in the region. Countries have the same interests; the one and only struggle is an issue of Kosovo. Still, bilateral relations

are improving rapidly. As Minić mentioned, there is no real need for reconciliation, it is more a need of normalization, with civil society and business representatives playing important part in the process. She also opened the topic of a project called *Mini-Schengen*, initiated by the governments of the countries of Western Balkans, most notably Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia. According to her, the project is still under a question mark, as documents are hardly accessible, but on the positive note, common interests are visible. Yet, there is a problem to sign any documentation because of the situation regarding Kosovo's taxes on goods from Bosnia and Hercegovina and Serbia. For the people to really embrace the reconciliation process in the countries, stories need to be used and developed, as there are many positive ones, and there are many ways how to influence public perceptions. In Serbia, problems with neighbors were treated as unique to Serbia and Serbs were often shocked to learn that there are similar stories among EU countries. Minić concluded with the remark that this project helped a lot to deepen the understanding of reconciliation.

After a short break, the event continued with the second part, a panel discussion moderated by Jelica Minić and two speakers, distinguished experts on the region of Western Balkans, **David Hudson** from Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations, European Commission, and **Andre de Munter**, Policy Analyst at the European Parliament. The debate started with the notion that it is important to find a vocabulary for different audiences in the process of reconciliation. Good neighboring relations are necessary for that, together with improvements of bilateral cooperation. Working together for common objectives is the same for Western Balkans and EU countries. However, the context is different in the case of the Western Balkans as the legacies of past, such as war crimes, had never before to be dealt with in the EU accession process. Those issues can be used by nationalists if they are not resolved properly. Cultural and youth cooperation will also need to be raised as one of

main goals and improved by the European Commission. The youth was defined as the most important player in reconciliation process, as they hold stronger views and are not necessarily open to reconciliation.

Regarding the Berlin Process, the EU is being very pragmatic. The Berlin Process is a useful mechanism because it is not a forum encompassing the whole EU but only a group of member states, which gives it more flexibility. Due to its practical focus, people can see that progress made, although slowly. But this is only on a technical level.

During the debate the audience was informed that there will be a meeting between President of the European Parliament, **David Sassoli** and speakers of the parliaments of Western Balkans, focusing on the topic of rule of law, where the reconciliation process will be discussed too. European Parliament is currently working on a summary of recommendations made by Members of the EP towards the Zagreb Summit. Overall, it was mentioned that although things are not all well, a lot of work is being made by the EP. There are some lost opportunities, like the one during the October Summit. In 2019 reports, there is a lack of honesty, some criticism towards the incidents and actions and some "shaming" of concrete people. The EU was neglecting reconciliation for past decades and the EP should as the only elected representative body take a stronger action in this process. The Prespa Agreement is serving as a good example on positive cooperation, but not in the context of past wars, so still there is no comparable agreement for such an issue. The importance of cooperation with churches was stressed as well, as we see a negative example currently in Montenegro. Again, there is no reaction from EU, and there should be one. To conclude the debate, a lack of consistency from the EU was pointed out as the most crucial problem. For example, the EC criticizes the state capture in Western Balkans countries but does not implement any direct steps or solutions to this problem.