

A Liberal Perspective on **Enlargement**  
of the European Union

# European Voices in the **Western Balkans**

November 2020



# European Voices in the **Western Balkans:** A Liberal Perspective on Enlargement of the European Union

## **Pro-European Voices in the Western Balkans: A Liberal Perspective on Enlargement of the European Union**

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## Table of Contents

About the Publishers .....	4
Introduction .....	6
Liberal Voices in Bosnia and Herzegovina .....	7
Liberal Voices in Montenegro .....	9
Liberal Voices in North Macedonia .....	11
Liberal Voices in Serbia .....	13
Conclusion .....	15
Messages to the EU (Annex) .....	17

## About the Publishers



### **The European Liberal Forum**

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 46 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard.

ELF was founded in 2007 to strengthen the liberal and democrat movement in Europe. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European.

We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. At the same time, we are also close to, but independent from, the ALDE Party and other Liberal actors in Europe. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different actors.

# European Voices in the **Western Balkans:** A Liberal Perspective on Enlargement of the European Union



## **Boris Divković Foundation**

Boris Divković Foundation (BDF) is founded in 2013 with the aim of improving political situation and practice in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Foundation promotes responsible policy, which will serve all citizens and act on the principles of equality, coexistence, and solidarity.

The vision of Boris Divkovic Foundation has been marked with the desire to have the political activity align with the moral principles, and Boris Divkovic has advocated this idea throughout his entire political engagement. The wide dispersal of the opinion that the connection of the moral and politics is impossible is nothing but the consequence of the perennial rule of the irresponsible politics.

Boris Divkovic Foundation relies on the assumption that it is possible and necessary to practice and keep ideological decontamination of the term politics publicly, and thus establish the grounds for the involvement of the honest and responsible people in the BH political processes.



## **D66 Internationaal / Stichting IDI**

D66 Internationaal / Stichting IDI is an independent yet integrated pillar of the international work of the Dutch progressive liberal party D66. D66 Internationaal / Stichting IDI is committed to contribute to working for more sustainable, democratic, and open international societies.

To this end, D66 Internationaal / Stichting IDI works mainly on political trainings and academies, the development of liberal social thought and best-practice sharing.

Respect for human rights and minorities, promotion of inclusive institutions and practice of sustainability are key elements of the projects.

## Introduction

A simple glance at a map of Europe is enough to see why a joint European future for all European countries is inevitable and that it would be a logical interest of the European Union to spread its borders across the Western Balkans and further strengthen its position in the region. Still, keeping talks of enlargement alive is getting more and more difficult every year.

Even before the pandemic, the opinion that it is necessary to reform the accession criteria before any new enlargement talks should begin has emerged, which has temporarily suspended candidacy talks with Albania and North Macedonia at one point, and almost caused serious backsliding in the latter Western Balkan country. Although the European Union is still mostly engaged in fighting the COVID-19 outbreak, preparing itself for the post-pandemic crises, and trying to make internal reforms in order to tackle existing and possible future problems in member states, talks on enlargement should not halt. And the two priorities – the one on the internal and the one on external strengthening of the European Union – must not be considered mutually exclusive, because they both benefit the geopolitical position of Europe.

Therefore, liberal activists and policy makers from four Western Balkan countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) have decided to take initiative and promote talks of a joint European Future and a stronger European Union, based on the values and standards of liberal democracies amongst European liberals. This paper is an opinion piece written by them, and is supposed to inform liberal activists in Europe, but also to others who are interested in the topic, on what a liberal perspective on EU enlargement in the region looks like.

## Liberal Voices in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The latest Country report of the European Commission on Bosnia and Herzegovina which was published in October 2020, like other country reports, accompanies the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, so it is for a lot of EU officials the only source of information on the current status of the country's Stabilisation and Association Agreement and the current political situation in the country. The current consensus is that over all almost no progress has been made in fulfilling the requirements, but if we take a closer look at some of the details in the document, the report on Bosnia and Herzegovina might especially be interesting for liberals in Europe. Namely, out of the few examples of progress that was started to be made, three very important ones are related to liberal political activists in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The first progress mentioned has to do with local elections in Mostar finally being held in December 2020. The context of this has a lot to do with the fact that local liberal political activist Irma Baralija sued the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina a couple of years ago. Reason? There have been no local elections in her hometown Mostar since 2008. The European Court of Human Rights has ruled in her favour and deemed it unacceptable in a democratic country (case 30100/18, Baralija v. Bosnia and Herzegovina). She has continued to advocate for the cause and her fight has paid off at last. Even though her personal advocacy in Brussels played a great role in bringing democracy back to Mostar, and the EU was the one to put the final pressure necessary for reaching an agreement, representatives of the EU Delegation in Bosnia and Herzegovina have ultimately decided to negotiate the final details on this years' local the elections in Mostar with leaders of those parties who have been the ones responsible for holding off the election for over a decade, in the first place.

The country's 2020 report indicates that the commission is aware of the ruling parties being the ones mostly blocking the country's progress towards a future within the EU and that unconstructive dialogues of these political parties are staggering the development of the country. Therefore, it remains unclear why the EU representatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina chose to officially have talks on returning local democracy to Mostar with party leaders instead of government officials and representatives of the country's Central Election Commission, but it has sent out a bad message to the general public. A

# European Voices in the **Western Balkans:** A Liberal Perspective on Enlargement of the European Union

lot of people pointed out that it felt as if the international community and the EU were endorsing partocracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina – one of the country's burning problems.

The Report confirmed that the rule of law, especially the fight against organised corruption, in Bosnia and Herzegovina are still in need of serious reforms. But some progress was started to be made in this area as well, again, thanks to efforts made by liberals in the country. After the 2018 general election, a programme-based, broad coalition of six parties from both sides of the political spectrum formed the regional government in Sarajevo Canton. Efforts made by the government led by a liberal prime minister (Edin Forto) and a liberal minister of justice (Lejla Brcic) to fight corruption and maximise the transparency of its work were widely acclaimed (even an article about it was published in the Financial Times, 13 August 2019). The government-proposed anti-corruption activities and legislation, especially the new Law on Property of Public Officials of Sarajevo Canton, which was later adopted by the cantonal assembly, were supported by citizens, as well as by foreign ambassadors, local CSOs and international organisations. This was also mentioned in the EC's 2020 country report.

The Sarajevo Cantonal government was also the one to create a safe environment for the first Pride march to be finally held in September 2019. Needless to say, that this enormous progress regard fundamental rights and freedoms happened because a liberal prime minister made the difference. Regardless of its high approval ratings, the Sarajevo Canton government was ousted by the new majority and a new government was appointed beginning of March 2020. Nevertheless, it is still believed to be one of the most popular governments ever to be formed in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Also, the four remaining parties have continued their constructive dialogues amongst themselves and other parties and formed coalitions across the country for the upcoming local elections, for winning mayorships and local council majorities.

This shows a strong how the strengthening of liberal values in Bosnia and Herzegovina can lead to a faster integration of European values into the Bosnian society, and that liberal political activists in the country are capable of delivering results to one of the country's most difficult long-standing issues. So, even though the consensus on the latest country report says "no progress", details that will hopefully become even more clearer after the local elections, definitely show that the potential of progress exists and that Bosnia and Herzegovina, in all of its complexity, can indeed become a true European liberal democracy in the future.



## Liberal Voices in Montenegro

Montenegro is the frontrunner amongst the candidate countries in the Western Balkans which is also made clear in the 2020 country report of the European Commission. In the summer of 2020 Montenegro opened Chapter 8 of the acquis – the final negotiation chapter. And Montenegro continues to broadly implement the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, but the key for negotiations advancement lies in the progress of rule of law reforms.

What has marked the year 2020 in Montenegro was the strong polarisation occurred because of the fact that in December 2019 the past government proposed a new law on freedom of religion or belief, which stipulates that all religious sites that were in state possession before Montenegro lost its statehood (1 December 1918) are to be considered State property, unless the religious organisation is able to provide evidence of ownership. This has caused a reaction of outrage from the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and its followers in Montenegro and rest of the region. The Montenegrin society became highly polarised over religious and national identity. Further tensions in relations with governments of Serbia and that of Bosnia and Herzegovina's entity of Republika Srpska have arisen.

This newly polarised sentiment has occupied citizens of Montenegro for most of 2020 and has reached its peak during the parliamentary elections on 30 August. Up until this year the EU has criticized Montenegro on becoming a failed democracy. Despite of this, Montenegrins proved them wrong in 2020. Even with high polarisation, elections were held democratically and were competitive and transparent, according to monitoring results of OSCE/ODIHR representatives in the country, with few concerns raised because of the advantage of the ruling party when it comes to fair media coverage. After the election, a surprising new majority was elected and negotiations for forming a new government have begun. This indeed suggests that Montenegro is almost on par with democracies in the European Union, and possibly even ahead of those which are currently experiencing democratic backsliding, but it has also made space for new concerns, mainly related to potential backsliding of liberal and European values, with the new majority being ideologically variegated.

The Djukanovic-led majority that ruled the country up until the summer of 2020 has indeed managed to put a very pro-European oriented course on the Montenegro's future. With all its difficulties, mostly issues regarding media freedom and rule of law, this has

# European Voices in the **Western Balkans:** A Liberal Perspective on Enlargement of the European Union

been a government with a strong pro-EU oriented sentiment and has been active in establishing European values in the country. It has even managed to adopt a same-sex partnership law one month prior to the election in 2020, when it lost support and the ability to form a new majority. Concerns for potential backsliding in those established values come from the fact that the election campaign of the opposition was strongly enforced by the Serbian Orthodox Church, which was very much involved in this year's elections. Also, representatives of the parties forming the new majority that have been active in in the previous convocation of the parliament, have not supported the mentioned same-sex partnership law. Some of them even expressed negative sentiments regarding Montenegro's NATO membership and the country's stance on the recognition of independence of Kosovo.

The main challenge for liberals in Montenegro is going to be fighting for strengthening the rule of law, whilst at the same time trying to keep the country on a pro-EU course, by protecting European and liberal-democratic values from backsliding after the formation of the new government. Russian, Serbian, and Chinese influence have been present in Montenegro before, but the country's pro-EU path has been the most popular one amongst most of Montenegro's citizens. There is a fear that if the European Union halts and staggers Montenegro's further advancement in its membership negotiations, it might loose on popularity amongst citizens and that other foreign interests might again become stronger.

The upsides of granting membership to Montenegro lie in the fact that it is a small and neutral country, with good neighbourly relations, although those with Serbia have been shaken in the past year, because of the national and religious polarisation. Additionally, it can strategically become an important maritime border of the EU in the Adriatic region. Support for the advancement of the country's path towards EU membership is crucial, so that European values in the country continue being built, and already established ones do not get torn down. It is also important for the sake of keeping the EU's influence in the country as strong as it currently is.

This year, Montenegro has proven that it can continue its path toward EU membership, by protecting individual freedoms and democratic processes in the country. Of course, there is still a lot of work to do. Montenegro is a country largely dependent on tourism, so the COVID-19 pandemic has caused serious damage to its economy. But the country's advances must be promoted more, since currently it feels like Montenegro is not in the centre of attention when it comes to enlargement talks. The fight for European values must be supported and awarded in Montenegro, so it can continue its transformation from the regional frontrunner into an actual EU Member State.

## Liberal Voices in North Macedonia

North Macedonia has proven to be the new rising star of the accession talks. It has gained its candidacy status this year after overcoming both internal challenges, as well as obstacles that have surfaced due to the position of some EU member states. The European Commission has expressed words of praise in the 2020 country report, congratulating the government and citizens of North Macedonia on their continuous efforts when it comes to the country's alignment with the EU common foreign policy. And after praise, came Bulgaria's veto on North Macedonia's accession talks on the count of "historic" and "linguistic" reasons. It seems that every time the country takes a step forward on its accession path, the EU makes it difficult again.

Liberals in North Macedonia are the loudest voices for promoting and protecting individual rights and liberties. But they are also one of the loudest voices of the country's youth populations – the most important pro-European advocate in North Macedonia. Most of the country's problems that still need to be solved are the legacy of previous governments and liberals in North Macedonia are aware of them. They will continue to support and advocate on judicial reforms, strengthening the rule of law, fighting organised crime and further alignment with EU's common foreign and security policy. Tackling "the big ones" should not interfere with challenges in other departments, where reforms could greatly benefit North Macedonia, like progress in environmental and rural development and sustainability, as well as decentralisation of power and a properly planned equal regional development for all parts of the country.

Good neighbourly relations are also very important, but more support, instead of blackmail and new conditionality, is necessary to arrive from the EU's side. Reactions of support are currently very much necessary to come from EU political figures, regarding Bulgaria's decision to veto the start of negotiations between North Macedonia and the European Union. In North Macedonia's 'special case' we have a country with a still very strong pro-EU sentiment, that continues to deliver results on its path towards the EU, but faces blockades from member states due to unfair and questionable reasons. Instead, it should be able to focus on upcoming challenges like delivering public administration reforms, managing migrations flows, fighting organised crime, and reversing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on North Macedonian economy. Economic re-

# European Voices in the **Western Balkans:** A Liberal Perspective on Enlargement of the European Union

forms are one of the top priorities for North Macedonia, because if the country can become successful and highly functional, which is the main goal, then membership should come more naturally.

The country is on a good path, but the EU has a large responsibility in maintaining it that way, by simply making it its strategic interest to remain a popular influence in North Macedonia. It must help the improvement of neighbourly relations, but in the case of North Macedonia, the push must happen on the side of neighbouring EU member states. The EU needs to protect North Macedonian path towards the membership in the European Union, because the rest of the region is following how the EU treats its current 'star student' and this can directly impact the strength of EU's influence in North Macedonia and the entire Western Balkans.

## Liberal Voices in Serbia

Serbia is a candidate country whose very specific situation not only depends on the number of opened and closed chapters of the acquis, but also a lot on its relations to Kosovo and other neighbouring countries. The country has unresolved issues and problematic relations with most of the other countries in the Western Balkan region, one of which is an EU Member State (Croatia). And the fact that Serbia has a government that is acting badly towards its citizens and neighbours is not helping. This is a government whose actions on the path of Serbia's EU integrations are mostly declarative and symbolic, but do not seem to deliver much. Also, declarations indicating alliances and special relations with other foreign actors in the country, namely Russia and China, made by the current government, suggest a foreign policy that is going to be difficult to align with that of the European Union.

The 2020 country report of the European Commission is a bit too gentle with its diplomatic wording addressing the issues caused by the government of Aleksandar Vucic, but it does raise some important questions. The government's foreign policy is one example. Keeping up special relations with Russia and China has led to a very Eurosceptic rhetoric emerging during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. This rhetoric has been further ignited by misinformation about the level of EU's contribution in fighting the pandemic. This is especially worrying if we take into account that the Commission has identified a low-level transparency of media ownership and of the overwhelming advantage the governing party has when it comes to major media outlets promoting and favouring the government and its policies.

The problem of media freedom in Serbia has been present for some time now. It became more visible during the campaign for this year's parliamentary, provincial, and municipal elections, which were held 21 June 2020. There was a great shortage in transparent and non-bias discussions offered by the media. But the main problem concerning these elections was a divided opposition – one part decided to run against the ruling party and another large part decided to boycott the elections. Now, there is basically no valid opposition in the Serbian National Assembly, which gives the final touch to Vucic's absolute rule of the country.

# European Voices in the **Western Balkans:** A Liberal Perspective on Enlargement of the European Union

Bilateral relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina remain complicated and relations with Kosovo are still the main challenge for this or any Serbian government. Additionally, 2020 was marked by a great strain on bilateral relations between Serbia and Montenegro, after the law on freedom of religion or belief adopted in Montenegro caused a reaction of outrage from the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Serbian government has been accused of meddling into Montenegro's internal politics and the electoral process in August. Even after a new majority has been elected in Montenegro, tensions between the countries still exist.

Liberals in Serbia feel that the best way to achieve progress for Serbia on the path towards EU membership is by strengthening the democratic processes, media freedom and rule of law. This way citizens will regain trust in democracy and the pro-European sentiment will rise, and with it the will to tackle other big issues in the country and rest of the region.

The EU delegation in Serbia is forced to cooperate mostly with Vucic's government, but conditionality must not be taken off the table at any moment. It is nearly unthinkable that the current government will be able to resolve the issue with Kosovo or align foreign policies with those of the EU, especially when it comes to sanctions against Russia. If Serbia is strategically important to the European Union, then strategies for promotion pro-EU sentiment must be clearer and the EU cannot just be an observer and grader, but become an even more active participant in the country and the rest of the region. When it comes to the popularity of the EU, it is strong with young people, since most of them tend to migrate towards Member States. On the other hand, supporters of the current regime are more likely to consider populist and illiberal European governments, which are now being deemed as backsliding democracies, to be Serbia's best allies in the EU.

Main challenges that lie ahead, according to liberals, are first internal problems and then those of a regional context. The European Union should not only be focused on "fixing" Serbia's role in the region, since solving internal issues, and a serious need for reforms, are equally pressing priorities, which should gain much more attention. Otherwise, the Serbian government will continue acting as it can be amnestied from delivering a high functioning democracy and rule of law to its citizens, while enjoying the same amount of support from the EU. Serbia indeed has an important role in the region and is the "grand prize" for many different foreign actors, when it comes to promoting their interests, but geography and the European sentiment of future generations of Serbs are an advantage for the EU and show great potential of a bright future for the country.

## Conclusion

With Brexit happening and the Eurosceptics becoming louder, anti-EU sentiments emerge, and those sentiments are not something liberals from the Western Balkans can comprehend. For them, the European Union is still a beacon of rule of law. Those are things they lack in their countries and they look at EU membership as one of the greatest means for political stability in an unstable region. The EU is currently turned inwards and tackling its internal problems, but looking at those who admire its values, might help the EU become motivated for finding mechanisms to protect those values.

A joint European future is inevitable for all European countries, no matter if they are EU member states or not. Still, it is important to keep the influence of EU promoted values strong in the Western Balkans, because the region is one of the EU's closest neighbors and there are different foreign influences intertwined in the region. If the European Union starts losing its influence, by continuing to be unclear on how its future relations with the Western Balkans might look like, this can cause some serious damage to the credibility of the enlargement process.

Those who have a negative stance towards the accession process should try having a more active role in promoting what they stand for in the region, instead of just being plain critics. Ironically, current loudest critics on enlargement are those who are the least involved in the region. It would also be good if people in EU member states could have more positive news coming from Western Balkan countries and vice-versa.

All participants agreed that the priority is to continuously focus on delivering the "hard reforms", mainly those regarding economy, democracy and rule of law, so that trust in the electoral processes and the judiciary system can be restored among citizens of the Western Balkan region. For them membership is not the only goal, it is more of an award for achieving the ultimate one – implementing the necessary reforms. For example, backsliding in EU member states has shown that rule of law reforms are ongoing processes, that do not end after membership, so developments on special mechanisms on rule of law are always welcome but should be handled with great delicacy. It cannot

# European Voices in the **Western Balkans:** A Liberal Perspective on Enlargement of the European Union

be an alibi for blocking accession processes but should be always promoted and monitored, regardless of one country's status in relation to the EU.

In 2020, amid a pandemic that has shaken the entire Globe, the European Union is still forced to deal with the culmination of long-standing internal problems, like Brexit or the backsliding on democratic standards of some of its member states. But potential weakening of the EU's geopolitical role can happen if both the internal difficulties are poorly handled, as well as in the case of a decreasing EU influence with its closest neighbouring countries – mainly those of the Western Balkans. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us how we must rely on each other to overcome the most difficult cross-border situations. Because, in its essence, enlargement is one of the last steps necessary for achieving consolidation of all European territories.



# European Voices in the **Western Balkans:** A Liberal Perspective on Enlargement of the European Union

## Messages to the EU (Annex)

The following statements are personal hopes and thoughts of liberal activists, who have made it their desire and occupation to drive the reform processes in the Western Balkan region and seek the support of the EU and its institutions in making their accession possible.

### MESSAGES FOR THE COUNCIL:

*"When discussing matters of enlargement, it would be better to communicate decisions and offer greater transparency around the discussions (I would also recommend this to the Commission around its annual reports). While of course this will be very technical at times, it would help prevent the reporting and communicating of the Council decision vis-à-vis North Macedonia and Albania being presented as a negative signal and vetoed, and then a fait accompli at a later date, with reporting overlooking the many years and accession process to begin."*

Andrew Burgess,  
United Kingdom

*"Montenegro, as a stability factor in the Western Balkans, has proved to be a good alliance to the European Union while overcoming war and political issues in the region. As an example, for a good cooperation, EU should emphasize Montenegro and accept it as a member. In that way, EU would show they care about peace and prosperity in the Western Balkans".*

Ivan Dragojević, Montenegro

*"If enlargement of the EU is not a popular topic among voters in the member states you govern, maybe a strong Europe in the geopolitical scene is. So, instead of vetoing and blocking the expansion of European influences, you should lead by example and take a more active role in the region. The ones who are blocking the accession are ironically the ones least involved in the region. Show us how you would overcome our obstacles, become those who actively promote values you feel are missing in the region. It's easy to be an observer and commentator, but being an active influencer is hard".*

Jasmina Mrso,  
Bosnia and Herzegovina

# European Voices in the **Western Balkans:** A Liberal Perspective on Enlargement of the European Union

## MESSAGES FOR THE COMMISSION:

*"Be direct and upfront about the process - offer public rebuke of any anti-EU positions, and demand that the government takes its EU approach seriously. Do not recommend that Chapters be opened unless benchmarks are met but be clear on what these benchmarks are. It is important that citizens understand what the requirements for membership are, otherwise, messages from the EU will be hijacked by the government's propaganda machine".*

Natan Albahari, Serbia

*"Insist that Bosnia and Herzegovina fulfil the Rule of Law criteria. Do not falter on those conditions. If you do, you will further strengthen the corrupt parties and leaders".*

Damir Arnaut,  
Bosnia and Herzegovina

## MESSAGES FOR PARLIAMENT:

*"Think in opportunities, not in obstacles. Live up to the promises you make and see your partners on the other side of the negotiations as your equals".*

Martine van Schoor, Netherlands

*"We need more discussions in Parliament and not just single messages. Work with people in the region, be informed, follow shadow reports, talk to the opposition..."*

Sanela Klarić,  
Bosnia and Herzegovina

*"Stop the cultivation of a new Orban in Serbia!"*

Aris Movsesijan, Serbia

*"I believe that the European Parliament is the most relevant institution for us, since it can become the voice that liberals from the Western Balkans need in the European Union."*

Martin Apostolski, North Macedonia

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This paper was written by Naša Stranka (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Liberal Democratic Party of North Macedonia, Liberal Party of Montenegro, Civic Platform (Serbia) and Nova Stranka (Serbia) as a final product of the EU Mentorship Programme for the liberal parties of the Western Balkans created by Boris Divkovic Foundation, D66 Internationaal and NEOS Lab, organised by the European Liberal Forum.



This paper is not meant to speak for all the Western Balkans states, nor is it meant to represent all the liberals. It is meant to spark constructive debate. If you want to contribute to that and want to respond to the authors of this paper, **please contact [anela@bdf.ba](mailto:anela@bdf.ba)**.

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