

Croatia and Western Balkans States (WB6) -  
North Macedonia

**May 8, 2020, Siget 18 C, 10 000 Zagreb, Croatia**

10.00 **Welcome and Introduction**

**Holger Haibach**

Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Zagreb

**Gordan Akrap, PhD**

Hybrid Warfare Research Institute

10.05 **„Keynote Speaker “**

**Gordan Akrap**

Hybrid Warfare Research Institute

10.15 **Discussion**

**Norbert Beckmann-Dierkes, Ph.D**

Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Beograd,

**Vasko Naumovski, Ph.D**

Faculty of Law in Skopje

Former Deputy Prime Minister of the Government in charge of  
European Affairs and Former Ambassador in the USA

**Vasko Stamevski, Ph.D**

Faculty of Law, President of Senat University, International Slavic  
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**Veton Latifi Ph.D**

South-East European University (SEEU) in Tetovo,

**Florian Feyerabend**

Desk Officer for Western Balkans and South Eastern Europe at  
Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) headquarters in Berlin

**Prof.dr. Miodrag Vuković,**

Parliament of Montenegro

**Moderation:**

**Holger Haibach,** Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Zagreb

**Gordan Akrap,** Hybrid Warfare Research Institute

Holger Haibach

Ladies and gentlemen welcome to the 2nd edition of the series of Croatia and the West Balkan 6. We already have held head one with our partner and I would like to welcome Dr Gordan Akrap from the Hybrid Warfare Research Institute. In December last year we dealt with the topic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, now we are going to take a closer look at the countries of Montenegro and North Macedonia. We just had a virtual summit which dealt with the enlargement, which was held under the Croatian presidency. So we thought it was time to discuss all these topics that have to do with the enlargement policy and to see what is going on in the region and in a broader sense as well.

I would very much like to welcome all of the participants in this whole discussion. I already mentioned Gordan - thank you very much for your initiative, you are a helpful partner as you always have been. I also would like to welcome my dear colleague Norbert Beckman, PhD. He has a very interesting role right now because for the moment he is overseeing four countries in the region which his Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo. I would also like to very much welcome Vasko Naumovski, PhD, from the faculty of law in Skoplje, who is the former deputy Prime Minister of the government in charge of European Affairs and former ambassador in the United States of America. I would also like to very much welcome Vasko Stamevski, PhD, Faculty of Law, president of the International Slavic University and also Veton Latifi the Southeast Europe University in Tetovo, professor Miodrag Vuković member of the Parliament of Montenegro and last, but not least my esteemed colleague and so to speak my boss Florian Feierabend from the headquarters of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation who is overseeing all of the activities in South East Europe.

As I already said we are trying to take a closer look what the outcomes of the summit where, but we also want to have a look at the current situation regarding the crises and what is happening in a broader sense in the region. For that reason, I would like to hand over the word to my esteemed colleague Dr Gordan Akrap.

Gordan Akrap

Thank you, Holger. It is always a pleasure for me personally and for my institute to work with you and to work with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. My best greetings also to all the guests who are with us here today. I hope that we are going to continue to work on this subject because South East Europe and the West Balkan countries are very important for us - not just as our neighbours, but because of many other things. There are many challenges that we in the European Union are faced with, which are connected with the West Balkan 6 countries. Allow me to give you a brief introduction on the today's discussion, that will be based on our communication so far and your opinion.

For years we can see that different attackers are using hybrid attacks while trying to achieve different goals: political, economic, security, military, cultural, social.... Hybrid attacker is trying to achieve a state of information supremacy by influencing the decision-making process of the target audience: in order to control communication channels as well as the information content that is moving through those channels. The goal of the media, used as a communication channel in influence operations, is often not to inform but to manipulate with data and information, knowledge and emotions. The information attacker is trying to conceal its actions, intentions and identity to prevent the detection and identification of malicious actions. The intensity of disinformation activities is especially evident in the time before

the outbreak of crises, during crises and during conflicts and wars. They intensify further in the times before elections and referendums. This was very clearly seen in the 2016 US presidential election, Brexit (2016), the referendum in North Macedonia (2018), as well as in numerous influence operations directed against citizens of Ukraine and the Baltic States, and during the current corona crisis.

Based on the analysis of those and other similar examples and the consequences that have arisen, it is necessary to develop democratic activities that could reduce or disable the malicious effects of disinformation. WB6 countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) remain politically, security, economically, socially, highly volatile, and insecure. Political and social elites have generally not developed themselves to a level that can guarantee the creation of the necessary level of social agreement, or consensus, about the key issues that are necessary for the future positive development of individuals and communities. Numerous interethnic issues and relations continue to be plagued by history, unfortunately without a vision and the ideas that could develop optimism and positive future development.

Yes, we are also faced with corona crisis. But this crisis will pass I hope very soon. We have learned a lot from this epidemic based on quite different approaches on how to solve this challenge. This crisis endangered our economies, our societies, our way of life. But this challenge has shown solidarity, how we can act united, how we can successfully coordinate our activities and help to each other when this help is needed by someone else. EU will, as it is clearly written in Zagreb 2020 summit conclusions, give significant support and help to WB6 countries for supporting their social and economic recovery just as health sector. This crisis will be soon behind us. Even in a case of second infection wave that might

appear in September/October, we are going to be better prepared for even more successful reaction. What we need is to, even in those emerging challenges; protect our democracy, our freedoms and societies from negative influences, from different destructive disinformation campaigns.

Active and intense interference in internal processes in other countries, justified as a protection of their own ethnic and religious communities, with constant provocation of interethnic conflicts, show that these democracies and societies are very fragile, sensitive, and vulnerable. Very vulnerable to even lesser challenges that they may face with, and which states with a consolidated and developed democracy would not even notice. Therefore, it is necessary to make intensive efforts to safeguard the level of achieved democracy and continue to act in a positive and developmental spirit: to build, not to tear down, to create, not to distract. The rule that the ancient Romans noticed and defined with the dictum of *Divide et Impere* remains crucial in planning all these influence operations.

The key segment of any democratic process of any society are free, multi-party and democratic elections, where citizens, by their own free will, can elect their future representatives. By the end of this calendar year, there are going to be several elections that can significantly affect the future of the WB6 countries (on an individual and group level) either in a positive or in a negative way. North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia will hold parliamentary elections very soon. Elections to the Croatian Parliament, the US presidential election (November 2020) and, no less important, party elections to the leadership of German political party CDU will also take place by the end of this year. It should not be ruled out that, in some cases, already referred to as a reality, each of these election processes will be influenced by different hybrid attacks coming from the spectrum of hybrid

threats with the aim of directly affecting their results. This is especially true for elections in Montenegro, North Macedonia and the US.

Therefore, in order to systematize the results of numerous analyses and documents produced by experts from NATO STRATCOM CoE and Hybrid CoE, additional efforts are needed to be done in order to protect elections, as an administrative event and the political process, from numerous malicious influences. At the same time, it is also necessary to protect the public, or the electorate, from such malicious acts. By protecting the integrity of the electoral process, we are protecting the foundations of Western democracy. The protection of democracy is the protection of the attained level of human rights, both at an individual and group level, as well as on a national and EU level.

An important role in the malicious influencing activities on the election results has the data and information published on various social networks. Besides social networks, we do not need to neglect influences at different communication groups in our smart phones and computers. The abundance, diversity, frequency and reproducibility of the data and information on those networks that we as individuals and organizations are constantly publishing, as well as the disinformation (audio, video, photo and textual nature) is truly astounding. They spread faster than any virus. Disinformation, which is an integral part of the wide range of activities within the influence operations, is used as a source that gives additional energy to other activities within the same activities' spectrum. The driving force behind this disinformation are, very often, our personal data and information that we freely (with or without consent) share with many persons (known and unknown) at the www. We just need to recall ourselves how this practice of manipulation and practically

unacceptable management of our data, experts from Cambridge Analytica called: Data Driven Behavioural Change.

As I said, WB6 countries are in very sensitive position now. Corona crisis is still here, political instability also, lots of internal disputes and open questions, tight interethnic and interstate relations, present interference of foreign actors .... political, economic, social future of the WB6 countries is on table now. Therefore, we are trying to get some answers on questions such as corona crisis, its influence on social, political and economic situation, recent NATO membership of N. Macedonia in NATO and opening of negotiation process, what Macedonia is expecting from NATO and EU, the future of Prespa Agreement and its influence to elections that are going to be held very soon, are there any negative domestic and foreign influences in a form of hybrid attacks visible like the ones prior to Prespa Agreement was adopted? Off course that same questions we would like to ask our colleague from Montenegro because the development of crisis in Montenegro is very intensive in last few months. And elections are knocking on the door. Thank you very much for the time, Holger.

Holger Haibach

Thank you very much Gordan for giving us the broader overview of what is going on right now and what has been going on for quite some time. I would like now to ask my colleague Norbert: "you are in a unique position, because you oversee activities of the Foundation in four countries right now in this region. You have been around here for very much longer than I have been, for instance. The Croatian presidency of the European Union would normally have had the enlargement as one of the most important focal points, but unfortunately, this has all been overshadowed by the corona-crisis. However the Summit has given us some clues on how the EU wants to proceed regarding these topics and how the EU sees the enlargement process In future. I would like to ask

you in a broader sense: Can you give us your view on how the countries in the region, the ones that you oversee, understand the outcomes of the summit.

Norbert Beckmann

Thank you for the invitation. It is good to have a chance to discuss the situation in southeast Europe in these very special times of the Corona-virus on one hand, and on the other hand I think it is a time where we do not have only challenges, but there are opportunities, too, to get a little bit closer. And this should be my first remark. If I look back at the Zagreb Summit, it is really great, that everybody has participated in the Summit. And it tells me – one time more – that Europe is functioning. We have not only the European countries looking at what is happening inside the European Union, and not only to look at how they can deal with different kinds of challenges, it is also a very wide view to southeast Europe – and that is important.

Nobody has expressed it in that way, but I see the outcomes of the Summit also the ones in Thessaloniki and Sofia that people are really clear that southeast Europe is not far away from the issues of the European Union, that it is close and that it is part of our and of the European politics. I would like to underline that one more time – this outcome is really important. The expectations regarding Croatia's presidency were much higher, then they can fulfil - that is rather clear, because now we have a very special situation and the expectations in North Macedonia and Montenegro maybe Serbia and Kosovo are much higher, but everybody understands and knows that in these times we have to live today with our problems and challenges and that is what the situation has shown one time more.

What is happening in the four countries I have more or less an overview; we have some decent experts to have a much better overview so I can make only some comments. First of all I can see in Montenegro that they are dealing with this crises in a very good way. The government is more or less holding back and the main speakers in terms of the crises are experts and there is no visible struggle now inside. There will be elections in autumn and then we will see what will happen after the crisis. We shall see for the whole region how democracy works. But still, the results now show that how Montenegro is dealing with the crisis is not so bad. Hopefully they will understand in this part of political culture, to have another kind off discussion culture which could be kept up a little longer than only till the end of the crisis.

What is happening in Kosovo that is very interesting. In my expectations we do not have only elections in the countries you mentioned, Gordan, no I expect also elections in Kosovo. so in the whole region will see how democracy works. It is definitely a special situation, and we will see. This is one times more that we have a very special situation and where we have to take responsibility for this international difficult topic, which is how to deal with Kosovo and how to find a solution. A solution between Kosovo and Serbia is at the end of the day the key for the whole enlargement process more or less, for the southeast Europe countries.

Let us continue with North Macedonia. North Macedonia is more or less in a lucky situation - with the beginning of the corona-crisis North Macedonia has in accordance with their constitution put up a technical government. In my opinion there is no such big struggle inside the country; they do have some challenges of regarding the constitution and how to organize the elections, but I do not see any really painful discussions or something else. They will be happy that the enlargement process is opened and that

the NATO membership is fulfilled and so they will see that they are welcomed to the western countries and to the European Union. That is important. So now Serbia. Serbia is the biggest country in Southeast Europe – that is obvious - and now we have to see, as they are also dealing with elections, Maybe the discussions – if you look at the situation yesterday - it is difficult to say how they will organise the entire thing with the opposition parties, with the ruling party, with the parties who are boycotting, who are not boycotting the upcoming election. There we have to be careful and see what will happen with the democracy and the political and democratic system. But at the end of the day the way to the European Union, to the enlargement process, that is the only way for the whole region and we have to show – which is the outcome of the Zagreb Summit - that there is an international and European solidarity. Thank you so much.

Holger Haibach

Thank you very much Norbert for this overview. I think you outlined right that we must not only look at the challenges which are ahead of us, but also at the chances. And I think this is very important, especially when it comes to a region, which – as Gordan has outlined – not always politically stable and you also said that it is not only election time in the other countries, but also in Croatia, as well. Nobody knows exactly when the elections are going to be, but we are going to see a lot of political changes all over the landscape.

Now coming to the case of North Macedonia - and then I would hand over to Gordan for the discussion – I would like to ask professor Naumovski to give us a little bit of an overview. Since you have been the minister for the European integration are the best expert that could come in on the question regarding the topic on how the results of the Summit were perceived in Skopje and in

North Macedonia in general and please tell us how you look at the situation. So, professor, please...

Vasko Naumovski

Thank you! I just would like to congratulate you for the organisation of this event – although it has become a ritual. I think we should be happy to have an event like this, thanks to the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. And of course in light of the Croatian presidency I think that events like this should be held more often in order to remind ourselves and remind the region that - as you said at the beginning - Europe is an important thing for us, and for sure an important thing for the region. If we analyse the situation in relation to the Summit and the previous Summit and a little bit of history, I would say, in line what Mr Norbert said, the region might not be at its best when it comes to stability and the communication between the political entities within each country and also regarding the bilateral relations between the countries themselves. This is why it is even more important to confirm the European integration path of the countries not to allow backsliding in the reforms. So, historically whatever disappointment we had from the Summit or disappointment from the decisions related to the Western Europe or Western Balkans, we shall witness a situation where European reforms in the countries were not moving forward in some cases - on the contrary there were moving backwards. So I would say that there are still aspects that we should not ignore in this situation; it is not only the elections and the situation regarding Corona, but also situations within some of the member States of the European Union and the internal situation in the countries of the region. So I would say that this historical notion of the so called Balkans powder keg, that is a powder keg that can explode at any moment, is not only a historical notion. I would say that sometimes we have the feeling that if it was not for the clear European faith of the region, those goals from the past might

wake up. And it is not a situation where I would like to say that these guys from the region are saying that either send us to Europe or we will enter in military conflicts with each other again. It is a reality that we cannot just ignore that. The enlargement policy itself has brought the greatest benefits for the citizens from the countries of central and Eastern Europe and it is the most visible positive policy of the European Union in its history according to me. And we cannot allow the citizens of the countries from the region to be left outside of the benefits of the enlargement policy.

We are in a situation where in some cases - and that is the case in our country - we have a bilateral issue for example that delayed our decision to start with the negotiations for more than ten years. We thought that everything is behind us; nevertheless after the Summit we have seen that there might be some other states of the European Union that again are trying to use the bilateral relations and some open bilateral issues in order to delay or postpone the beginning of the negotiations for the full EU membership. Therefore I think that the EU should deal more substantially with the issue of the bilateral issues related to the enlargement policy. Namely, the opportunities of the EU member states to block the accession of a candidate country. We have seen it in the past, we have seen it in the case of the Croatian accession, we have seen it in the case of other countries of southeast Europe – and we thought it is behind us. But I think I might have been wrong. Some 10 years ago I wrote an article that bilateral issues might prevent the accession of the Balkan countries once they are getting closer to each other. So there is no country in the Western Balkans that does not have a bilateral issue with at least one of its neighbours. In a situation where a country is already inside and has the opportunity to use this veto right for the accession will bring us in a never ending story and

further postponing of the accession steps of countries from the Western Balkans.

So this is where the EU-institutions and the EU-leadership should be proven. I am not happy that until now I have not seen a substantial involvement on behalf of the EU in these possible dangers to the enlargement policy. When talking about the elections here, I would be happy to say that there is no significant political party or group that is against the EU-membership – on the contrary this is the beginning of our independence in the early nineties when we had a wide national consensus issue. The EU-membership helps this process. Nevertheless, I would say that there is a slight disappointment among the population that the date for the official beginning of the negotiations at the first conference that is about to be held has not been determined yet. As it was the case with the other countries - Serbia and Montenegro, the latest examples – there is a kind of an alibi that the Corona virus is the reason for that.

Nevertheless, we could have seen that they determined deep in the summer or early in the autumn when the conference would be possible to be held and the virus would have been behind us. With such a disappointment among the population I think there is need for greater involvement and encouragement from the European Union and from the member States of the European Union.

At the end of last year the Summit has proven there the internal decision making inside the European Union is not at its best - if we want to be honest - and it has shown that some member states are still in a dilemma whether the enlargement process should be the top priority on the EU-agenda or not. If we add certain other aspects to that – namely the internal political situation which is influenced by the enlargement process in some EU-member

states, the migrant crises in the past years and the rising nationalism in some countries inside the European Union, I think that we have a lot of work to do – together. Because when you combine these two situations together, nationalism inside the EU-member states and nationalism in an accession country, they tend to feed each other. I would say there is an unfortunate link between those two and it does not contribute to the overall aim to encourage the EU-reforms in each of the countries. I think there we have to go through several steps. First of all a clear encouragement of the countries to continue with the European path, in fact it has to be a clear path with specific steps on the accession process and the negotiations, which will secure the internal reforms and the continuation of this reformers on one side, and also this new methodology for the negotiations, which has been proposed by the Commission and adopted later. This should not be an additional danger for the process itself.

Gordan Akrap

Thank you for that. I am glad to ha that there is a wide consensus in North Macedonia to join the European Union. Now you have become a member of the NATO, which I also going to be very helpful. I think as a Croatian citizen, who went through all these phases of the EU integration process, I can tell you it is a process. You have to fulfil quite a lot of questions and meet requirements; you need to invest a lot of time and a lot of efforts. But trust me, once when it positively ends, you're going to be a very happy and to have many reasons to celebrate. Now I would like to give the word to professor Latifi and ask him for his opinion on the same things

Veton Latifi

Thank you. Actually I would like to speak about two contexts and two syndromes regarding the main paradigm and some dynamics of the EU-integration for the Western Balkans and in general, with an aim to see how we can proclaim the best ways for conducting the negotiations and my main claim is still the same. But even the integration process of the Western Balkans, it goes beyond the reformation process. For this reason, I would like to speak about two contexts, which are two episodes and both of them I would call 'if everyone'.

The first 'if everyone': each of the countries obviously is determining its commitment to the EU-integration goals. That is very important as a starting point. But if everyone is having the same agenda and the same goals - of course not - and it is normal but if everyone is having friendly consular relations with everyone before joining the club, well they had to work on this issues on the way to the EU negotiations or during the negotiations. If everyone is having good relations and communications with those from the region already in the EU-club, well, this is still to be evaluated in the practice. And let's see: we have some agreements, we have some principles and some commitments. So let's see how this is going to work in practice. This is of course going to be manifested and reflected in the dynamics of the negotiations. In this context, relations with the neighbours to be on a very hard point of the agenda and the requirements. This is nothing new, but this is more and more a matter of sentiment, more and more required and promoted, which makes then the EU integration process of the West Balkan countries of course to go beyond the reformation process.

At the same time the issue of the neighbour policies as is expected to be there for on the top of priority by the hybrid attacks of the so-called malicious influences along the entire process. What is the situation with the second countries, which i called 'if

everyone' which is referring to the domestic internal situation. If everyone among the political actors within the context is having the same agenda and goal for the EU integration - of course again yes - but it has to make clear distinctions to what extent the populism either by right or by left.

It is no wonder that I am also mentioning populism with left - it can go. If everyone is having a commitment for the EU process of integration - mainly yes, but an indicator as if it is organised around a political consensus we hear in general a commitment and I would say a position about supporting or organising a political consensus. But then only claimed political consensus sometimes is not enough. We really need to think about the topic of the political dialogue.

If you take Montenegro – this might be a problem. If you take North Macedonia there is a wide political consensus for this main political actors. There is one or two subtend an not relevant political parties with pro-Russian orientation composed of a bunch of people who are not only trying to benefit from this and this is I said only a bunch of people who would be happy to benefited to be popular at the end as political analysts or opinion makers, rather than winning any seat in the Parliament. As they are aware that they can play neither the patriots, when the goal of the country is obviously the EU and NATO, nor they can play any relevant politicians who could I would say, could not win more than the votes of their families in the next cycle of elections.

If everyone among the ethnic communities and this is my next concern, if everyone among the ethnic communities or nations within these countries in the region is having one and the same joined agenda and goal for the EU integration to show the first the ethnic consensus and internal integration, how will it work? Again for Montenegro it is a challenge and for North Macedonia there

is a wide ethnic and political consensus for the EU-integration and we don't have a problem with this. In fact the last two issues the political consensus and I would say ethnic consensus, it might be an issue and target for hybrid interferences because these interferences are looking for holes. Even tiny holes as they see, as they are used to see the Balkans like a hole of troubles. And now the Balkans under the EU and NATO is not anymore, a hole.

What is the main national interest of the Balkan countries today? Of course, the EU and NATO integration, times are changing. Often amongst the logics from here towards the logics of compromises, that a big leader it could not be even imagined, but now we speak about implementing compromises about neighbours of the hard deals and talks and so on. So it comes as a part of the agenda for protecting national interests now. And protecting national interests now is the NATO and EU-integration process. Therefore, today in the Balkans there is no need to attack the countries. Therefore, by hybrid attacks aimed to attack the goals of the countries, the national interests and again, as I said, the national interests are the EU and NATO-integration process of the countries and this is again attacking national interests.

I mentioned at the beginning that I would like just shortly to speak of the paradigm of evolutions. As you remember we started to take such a long process compared to other regions like Eastern Europe or central Europe. In the Balkans we dealt and are still dealing with the transition paradigm. A long process. Then the democratisation process - again a slow process. Corruption and organised crime and now what is the paradigm behind that? Contesting and blocking neighbours. How to surpass the paradigm? Because contesting and blocking neighbours in the Balkans is for the last few years, I would say, a situation, which is also a new trouble, a new, I would say, challenge for the European Union and the main countries of the European Union itself. You

have to calculate the price if one political solution is ready for compromises for the sake of integration or not.

Let's see the Prespa Greece the name resolution for North Macedonia and Greece. What does North Macedonia has benefited? It is obviously open those for the NATO membership and getting a date for the start of their negotiations with the European Union. Now a new paradigm in the coming period is expected to be how to round up the situation regarding the neighbour's relationship. It is more practical to be seen not only statements; this is a time ahead to show in practice how compromises are working, and this is not to be wondered. Because if you see the last information package of the European Union as a structure, you will see that it is not anymore addressing only EU-enlargement and neighbour policies or neighbour relations.

In all these issues Croatia can be of help, I would say. Any other country of the region can be of help by sharing the experience and information process. But Croatia also how to deal with the relations with the neighbours during the negotiations, how to solve disputes, how to fight corruption, how to fight hybrid attacks to join everybody in the region together, because no other country can do this on its own. You should understand that this is a topic that can be a test for regional cooperation. Therefore, especially what Croatia can help to most of the countries is helping in developing capacities of negotiations.

So – dynamics. It will depend a lot on the negotiation capacities and preparations. Of course, it must also depend on the information processes, especially the legislation reforms and the dynamics of resolution or bilateral disputes. So this I see that as the three pillars. Again I will repeat - negotiation capacities or how sustainable the countries will develop during negotiation and

before starting the negotiations. Second: legislative and I would say administrative reformation and dynamics of resolution of bilateral disputes. The dynamics – it will depend a lot on one more issue: that one more issue, as I mentioned, is how the countries will be able to coping with hybrid attacks or attempts at the same time, and these Eastern influences. Attempts for provoking political tensions by the East in the ground of the Balkans.

Holger Haibach

Thank you. I think that was a very interesting piece of information, especially speaking about foreign influences, as far as the countries of the Western Balkans are concerned. For that I would like to bring in Florian Feierabend, my boss from Berlin. Florian I know, and you have actively been involved in it, that the foundation has done a lot of research on external actors. To me now and then the region seems to be like a marketplace of foreign actors who are trying to be involved and following certain interests. Perhaps you can give us an insight of what the Foundation has found out about that.

Florian Feierabend

Thank you very much Holger. First of all I would like to congratulate you, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation Croatia and Hybrid Warfare Research Institute for this very interesting form of discussion. Thank you very much also for having me here and for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the discussion. I would first of all like to start with some remarks building on what you said in the introduction, because history matters, and this is actually very true as all of you might know. You mentioned two dates: today is May 8th – we commemorate 75 years of the end of the 2nd World War and tomorrow May 9th when we will commemorate 70 years of the Schumann Declaration. Those two

dates are of course closely interlinked and we should be aware of that, because the whole project of the European integration was a direct consequence – well, there were attempts before that – but this is a direct consequence of the 2nd World War and the holocaust.

With the European integration process we experienced an unprecedented period of peace, prosperity and unity. However with three quite important limitations that sometimes we forget about and we should be very much aware of it, and especially we might have an audience today which is not just limited to the Western Balkans, but maybe Germany and the other member States of the European Union. It is important not to forget that prosperity, peace and unity was first only limited to the West of Europe. That was the time of the cold war, so it only holds true for the west of Europe and second it is connected not only to the process of the European integration. But of course, we should not forget that and it has been mentioned today – now Macedonia this year joined NATO and it was very much linked as well with NATO and with the American security umbrella. Sometimes it is forgotten, and this should be emphasised. And the third point of course is peace. A peace period was true for a great chance of Europe. But I mean we are talking now today about the Western Balkans and all of you personally experienced that there were troubling times in the nineties, to say the least. We are all aware of the Bosnian war, of the Croatian war or the Homeland war. We are aware of the Kosovo conflict. So it is not that long ago that actually even within Europe we had conflicts and war.

This leads me to my third observation, and this will be the bridge to your question. Nowadays there might be a discussion in the member States and even within Germany like we would hear voices that say, like, well I mean the Western Balkans they are the backyard of Europe, why should we care about them? This region

should not be our business, why should we? Why do we have to deal with problems and challenges we are currently facing within the European Union? Some people or observers would point to specific countries in central eastern Europe and challenges we might have to fight when it comes to the issue of the rule of law, or even to the eastern Balkans, the terminology which is used when it comes to the issue of corruption. Then I always recommend just to take a look at the map of Europe. I know maps and the Western Balkans is quite a tricky issue, but if you look at the political map of Europe you will see that if everything is coloured in blue - the colour of the European Union - there would be like one white spot: six countries. Six countries in the Western Balkans which are completely surrounded by member States of the European Union. Some of them already are member States of NATO. So the rest of them, they are also surrounded by NATO-States. So it is not actually like a backyard – if, then you have to use the correct metaphor and talk about a courtyard.

That is why it matters what is happening here. It matters that we have stability here, that we have a positive economic, political and social development there and that is also the reason why it is so attractive for the so called third powers or external actors to use this in the courtyard of Europe to distract, to deflect, to cause trouble for the European Union and to the political competition. And not only to the European Union, but to the entire West. Some issues were already mentioned. There are this inter-ethnic relation that are maybe challenging, to say the least, we have bilateral problems and challenges between the states, which have not been resolved yet. We have political culture that is also maybe different to other parts of Europe and which are making it possible to influence partners and therefore it is very important as a multiple gap. We have to care about this region and every instability in the Western Balkans would directly impact also the west of Europe.

Now your question what did we observe in terms of the political competition, the influence and the activities... I could talk about this for hours and about the different dimensions and activities there, the so called hybrid means and activities there and covered operations.

The case of Montenegro has been mentioned and it is very much concerned. I recently heard that the Russian foreign minister Sergej Lavrov called the president of Montenegro Đukanović a traitor. We all still remember what Russia was planning ahead of the last parliamentary elections in Montenegro, so we have to pay very much attention to all those elections coming up this year. I am very much sure that Russia will try to see this as an opportunity to create distrust and problems and headache for the European Union.

Let me focus on China for a moment. What we have observed so far when it comes to Chinese activities in the region, was the following: you have to look at that with a little bit of ambivalence, because China was investing mostly in the economic sector. They were very conducting infrastructure projects of course so there is always the challenge of risks of a trap, like it was the case with Montenegro, and there is often the risk of uncompiled behaviour, to say, like corruption. It is nothing that you can have against investment and the economy and infrastructure projects. That is the core of a broaden process.

But what we see now is a global struggle or a global competition of narratives here during the Corona crisis. The Chinese approach in this aspect changed quite significantly; what we saw in the past was that China tried to portray itself as a good actor. They tried to promote their own narrative of life, the Chinese dream. Now they are somehow following the footsteps of Russia, who also like to

use disinformation and spreading fake news and creating mistrust in the European Union and the EU-integration process. Corona, which is actually coming from China we should not forget this. Sometimes when we see China, which is acting altruism, a country that is helping everyone, but actually according to the behaviour of the Chinese Communist party the problem is that it could become the biggest pandemic - like it is now. They are using this opportunity of the fact that they were some weeks ahead of us, that they provide symbolic actions and help to the countries in the region and what happened from the European side? Nothing.

At the beginning we were preoccupied dealing with the situation and the corona-pandemic on our own. We should also not forget that at the beginning of the crisis it was limited to Italy and Spain only, which are big member state of the European Union. It was also an effect to the Eastern Balkans, they also had a few cases, but they were not as really affected by the crisis at that time as the western European and the some southern European states. And we also did not know how to deal with the situation and I would not say that some mistakes were made, but the decision of the 19th of March not to allow the export of medical equipment to the Western Balkans that was the least mixed signal to some leaders in the region. We made some corrections to that and now we - when I talk about 'we' I am not talking about the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, but I am obviously talking about the European Union - included the Western Balkans in certain initiatives, when it comes to procurement for example. And I mean it has been mentioned, the event on May 6th, two days ago, 3.3 billion euro of aid or support - it is not just an aid and loans, we should not forget about this. This is unprecedented and it is not something that should be taken for granted. And also my last point. European solidarity is like a two way road it is not like a one way road. I think it was a very good signal of Albania, as they also contributed to the Corona crisis providing help and assistance -

this is some nice signal and a symbolic symbol of European solidarity. With that I shall maybe stop and join the discussion later.

Holger Haibach

Thank you very much. We will come back to you when it comes to the German and European perspective on this whole subject. Thank you very much also for taking out of the example of China, because it is something that has been overlooked for quite some time. If we are talking about the reason, about this region, there are also other countries we could discuss like Russia, like Turkey, like the Gulf States and many other actors, but we could not discuss that, it would require a different discussion. I think it is important to have a look at all those foreign actors, because as it has been mentioned by the previous speakers - they have their influence on the situation and they are really trying to influence elections, they are trying to get economic influence and also getting political influence.

Gordan Akrap

Yes I completely agree with you, because this is something that was clearly written in the declaration of the Zagreb Summit. We need to improve our strategic communication towards the Balkan 6 countries, considering the fact that you decided to invest 3.3 billion euros in the economic, social and in the health system for their recovery. I would like to invite Prof. Stamevski and Prof. Vuković to join us. Please have in mind that – if it is going to be possible - your papers should not be longer than ten minutes so that we can have another 15 or 20 minutes for questions and answers and for possible comments. Professor Stamevski please start, then please Professor Vuković.

Vasko Stamevski

Given that the topic today is the Western Balkans with a focus on North Macedonia, I will talk about the current situation and thus raise issues that we can discuss later. The Corona virus has in principle dramatically changed lives all over the world including Macedonia. The world has not experienced this since World War II and almost all countries have already felt the effects of this pandemic. As for North Macedonia faced this crisis a few months ago and is resolving it as best it can. Certainly, this pandemic has a serious impact on the economy and of course on the political situation, given that this is an election year. We have heard various information, misinformation, spins, truths and lies. And that made our health crisis even more difficult. Our people are so defocused - on the one hand, our people are following the news regarding the health crisis and the problems that need to be solved and the measures that need to be followed, and on the other hand, the portals are full of political conflicts and accusations. Which is not pleasant to watch, for me as an ordinary citizen.

This health crisis will certainly have an impact on the economy in our country. Given the practically reduced economic activity of our companies, the government has adopted measures aimed at amortizing the consequences of the pandemic. I guess we will talk more about that later, but I want to emphasize that this year Macedonia has officially become the 30th member of NATO. It is important to know that NATO provides not only territorial security, but also for security for companies to invest in our economy. Why am I emphasizing this? Because we depend on foreign investments. We can also rely on our own economy, but we also need foreign investments.

What is interesting to me and what I would like to unravel, an issue that is quite debatable for me, and that is the issue of resolving multi-ethnic issues and relations - within the state and bilateral relations with neighbouring countries. The question is, is history the one that should separate or unite people? This question is quite intriguing for me, which I have noticed in almost all countries of the Western Balkans, it is not just the case in Macedonia. We are witnessing a period when all kinds of situations happen to us in the country.

I will mention two points that are important to me: the Prespa Agreement that we have signed, and the agreement that we signed in order to have a good neighbourhood relation with Bulgaria. What is even more interesting to mention was the day before yesterday at the Summit in Zagreb, it was also mentioned and put on the agenda, and it refers to exactly what is important for Macedonia, and that is the date for negotiations. We read about it on the portals and we know that it depends on when the bilateral issues between us and Bulgaria will be resolved. I don't think that this is a problem that should be an obstacle. We all know who we are and what we are and what our history is, however some minor mistakes would certainly occur.

Now the question remains - when I mentioned the Prespa Agreement, let me share with you my positive assessment, although at first I was against that agreement, because I did not like some provisions in that Agreement, I as a citizen of Macedonia. However, the question is whether the price we paid is justified? I think that now, after joining NATO, we have somehow justified one part, we are still waiting for this other part to come true - accession to the European Union - then I would say that the Prespa Agreement has paid off and that it has fully justified its existence. And these situations that are happening to us in the environment, we had some situations on April 27 in the

Assembly and there was more - I would personally classify it as asymmetric hybrid threats and dangers that foreign powers, third countries use to undermine the democratic system and the functioning of democracy. Although in our country democracy may be understood a little differently than it should be. I will stick to the framework of the initial presentations, I guess there will be time for discussion after my introduction.

Gordan Akrap

Thank you Professor Stamevski. The Prespa Agreement is just the beginning of the process and it has been clear that after all the obstacles for North Macedonia to join NATO were removed, Macedonia became the NATO member state. NATO is not just a military; it is more a political association of the countries that share the same values. The process of joining the EU is a little bit longer process, but trust me – once when it is going to be finished, when you will join the EU – I hope so – then you will probably say: yes, the price that we paid and what we have achieved after joining the EU is something that we had to do. Fighting myths and prejudices is one of the hardest things to do.

Now I would like to invite Professor Vuković from Montenegro to present his opinion on what is happening in Montenegro. Montenegro is going to be very soon one of the important topics of the conference. Professor Vuković, please begin.

Miodrag Vuković

Let me just say that I am privileged to be able to attend this debate. I cannot have the ambition to speak on behalf of Montenegro. I speak from Montenegro, but about my own opinion and based on that I will explain my own views, which can have a realistic ambition to predict not only the times to come

and the priorities they bring with them, but also certain suggestions within the national community and for our friends, towards which we are going, if we are not already well integrated into common decisions, and before the common policies.

I welcome everyone in the studio and I believe that in this way, too, we are on the right track to help to collectively find answers to the challenges facing Europe as a whole. The Western Balkans, the area where I live, my Montenegro, as my choice. Only in a formal sense I do not consider it part of the European Union - in essence, if we want to split. Most of Montenegro is a democratic community. People are aware in the choice of paths or paths that are in front of them and in front of their community. And they are aware of what a real chose is. I hope that we in Montenegro will work on it with dedication and tomorrow, in these times, as we have done so far, more dedicatedly, but it will all remain crippled, it will all remain vague, if we do not have the right interlocutor in the institutions and with individuals who decide on the creditworthiness and quality of these efforts in Montenegro.

I will talk about two issues. And that is the context, the current one, in which we find ourselves, and we in Montenegro and the whole community, the whole world, if I may say so, and our intentions, our expectations In relation with what we do and what our priorities are, and that is to check whether it is the right orientation, but also to see how much it is - conditionally speaking - whether we get adequate answers and encouragement from that side. These encouragements are aimed at continuing on the right path. These are encouragements based on those measures and actions of those bigger and more important ones who decide the fate of my community as well.

Montenegro was the first to be affected by the epidemic. Montenegro is a country where it is already publicly said that it

has shown all its growing and matured institutional and professional capacity. It has been shown to have an adequate, timely and obviously positive result and impact on this global evil. At the moment, the number of infected is decreasing. We are a small political and social community of 500 - 600,000 inhabitants. One would say that it is so much easier to organize, to prepare, to react. I will accept that. But at the moment we have 51 infected people with a tendency to fall every day, we have lost eight lives, these are the official figures, of the relevant institutions. Life is slowly returning to normal - thoughtfully and planned. We believe that we will find the right answers and the right formats here as well.

The second thing I want to say is that Montenegro, according to its capacities, has provided help and has shown once again what traditionally characterizes it as a small community. We have always wanted integration throughout history. We wanted to work with others - believe me, history has written it down, we pass it on to our students, to those new generations who should be in direct communication with their past, so that their future is more certain, safer and brighter - because who forgets and ignores its past will repeat it.

Montenegro wanted integration and believe me, because of that desire it thought more about cooperation with others than about itself. And so we have killed the state throughout history. Now we have rehabilitated it. For 13, 14 years now, we have been functioning as an independent subject of international politics and international relations - and we are doing well, thanks to the understanding of others who accept us as an equal partner. And the second question is that we, unlike all of you - and I am talking about the countries in the region - have gone through two transitions. When we went from the communist and socialist system to the democratic transition. We have fought to achieve

these European values, and at the same time we have dealt with our internal struggle, if I may put it simply. You know, the struggle on a global scale is a struggle for this or that system of values. I am aware of that. Very simplified: either we go back into the past, or we go forward. The majority in Montenegro is trying to keep up with the Western value system - which has been recognized - and we expect this situation to further confirm the reasons - because of our behaviour in all this - good neighbourly relations, our willingness to participate in helping people with our planes, with our modest airline to fly foreign nationals out of the country. With the efforts of Montenegro and its citizens, they returned to their countries, with our efforts, there were thousands of them. And our citizens were also returning with our planes. So we helped as much as possible and offered our capacities. I think that in this way we have shown the sincerity of our intentions.

What Montenegro is living today - I am happy that on these topics with a focus on Montenegro, as today is the focus on Northern Macedonia - on the efforts of our friends in that country - congratulations on joining NATO and I hope that negotiations will begin as soon as possible - that we will dedicate a thorough discussion to my country in the autumn. At the level of theses and to get slowly to the end - we are suffering from hybrid attacks - we are here in some awkward part of the Balkans, where the winds are colliding. Our ancestors wrote about it a long time ago, that winds from the east and the west collide here. It is a mythical space in the Balkans, but very exposed to attacks, to hybrid attacks. We also had a coup attempt. This was done with the intention of radically changing the orientation of a renewed and independent Montenegro and to deviate from the path of rehabilitation of democratic, European and world important values in Montenegro. This happened under the influence of those who thought that collectivist pan-Slavic should be organized and remain trapped in myths and mythically

exaggerated policies. I believe that Montenegro especially expects, I believe that you will understand what I mean - gratitude to our neighbours, friends, Croats who have rehabilitated one of the most important policies, the policy of modern Europe, and that is the policy of enlargement. Although we did not get the dates and remained disappointed, we did not get the expected practical measures to make it happen, but we hope it will happen under the German presidency.

Much more could be said about how the European Union coped with the pandemic, what the pandemic has shown when it came to the European countries. But it is more than obvious that what is dangerous has been defeated, a threat that continues today, and that is the move to multi-lateralism, to the need to cooperate, to the need to be part of the global community, to defeat demagoguery or visibly stumble and pull in the face of the need for mutual cooperation and together with the great once. And this has been practiced lately. To compromise some policies that have connected us when it comes to our national and civic interests.

Holger Haibach

Thank you very much Professor Vuković. Unfortunately, we have already progressed quite a bit, in time, but I just would like to ask Florian one last question. Professor Vuković has already hinted to the fact that Germany is taking over the EU presidency in the second half of this year. That brings in mind that Germany is playing a vital role and has always been positive as far as the enlargement policies were concerned. What I would like to know is the following: because you are in a unique position - you are a Berlin insider on the one hand, and you are somebody who is an expert on the region on the other hand. What is the view of Germany on the enlargement right now? And secondly, because we are politically linked as the Konrad Adenauer Foundation to

the governing parties CDU of the Chancellor Angela Merkel, how do the different bodies of the party and also of the parliamentary group look at the enlargement policies, especially when it comes to the West Balkan 6?

Florian Feierabend

Thank you very much for your question. If you ask what is the view of Germany or the German position on the enlargement, you have to differentiate between the general public and how they look at the enlargement and I would say this does not give you a complete the picture, because enlargement is a very abstract topic for them – like you would ask: would you like to see the country XYZ becoming or joining the European Union and just a month, or weeks prior to that the headlines dominated Albanian drug mafias probably, and the result would be quite low. There has been some numerous headlines last year - it was not overwhelming, let's say. Not enough for the support of the general public when it comes to the enlargement.

Now coming to the second question: how do the relevant bodies of the state view the enlargement and the position of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group? I would just like to refer to a decision that has been taken in September last year by the German Parliament. That was a resolution that was adopted with the votes of CDU/CSU and the Social-Democratic Party of Germany agreeing on giving green light for opening the accessions negotiations for North Macedonia and I would say giving a green to yellow light to open the accession talks with Albania. It was not an easy decision for the German Parliament or for the two parliamentary fractions, but they supported the government to take this positive decision. If we look now at the European level, what has been decided there or what are the preconditions for Albania to the start of the negotiation talks, you

would see that out of the 15 points or preconditions, 9 points are basically just copy and paste from the resolution of the German Parliament; the other remaining 6 are additional points or more elaborated or taking out from a separate bunch of these 9 points. What I wanted to say with this example is from the support of the German political community and all the political parties are at a level and agree on the enlargement, but when it comes then to the details and the conditions the picture looks a little bit more different. Especially the CDU CSU, which took a critical stand when it comes to Albania, North Macedonia did not cause that much headache, but they insisted on this very strong conditions or preconditions prior to opening the negotiation talks and prior to have this governmental conference.

So I think if you want to conclude: there is support from the German government for enlargements, however it stresses very much on the issue of conditionality, especially like many times we refer to the examples of Bulgaria and Romania. They acceded to quickly, they were not ready and there was a political discussion. Of course this is something that gets back to the general public and they still have that in mind. You always have to sell the European policies to your constituencies, so one should be sure that it is not something they is being given away for free, but there have to be reforms before and the countries should actually be ready to take the respected steps. I think with the new methodology this is a good way forward also to convince the audiences in Europe and especially in Germany of the process of the European enlargement, because it is a quite controversial and sensitive issue.

You mentioned that Germany always took a very special role or is still having a very special role with a strong commitment to the Western Balkans. I would just like to underline it is not only the enlargement process where Germany is standing strong, even

though emphasizing the conditionality principle. There is the Berlin process, we should not forget about this, and it was initiated in 2014 – 100 years after the outbreak of World War I – so history again plays a very important role. In the second half of this year we will have a conference, most likely in Sofia, conducted by Bulgaria and North Macedonia together. This will be a good example of regional cooperation. There we will see the economic and the investment plan for example. That is also a very strong commitment from the European side to the countries of the region.

Apart from what I just mentioned the second factor is the initiative that we witnessed last year. That was the conference of President Macron and Chancellor Merkel trying to bring in some new dynamic into the solution of the most pressing conflict in the region – the relationship between Belgrade and Pristina and their normalization of relations. I expect that after June 21st when the elections in Serbia will be held, we expect - if not corona is preoccupying everyone - I think there will be a new start of this Macron – Merkel initiative.

To conclude. Everything is standing strong, we are committed to the enlargement policy and there is more to the enlargement policy as I mentioned – we have the Berlin process, we have the Macron-Merkel initiative. We are a reliable partner when it comes to the European perspective, which in a German leading is not something away, but in a new membership perspective...that is the German perspective from my point of view.

Holger Haibach

Thank you very much Florian for this insight on the German position. I think that it is very important to stress – especially for those people who are not too familiar with the region, that as we

talked about the influence of external actors, it is just simply a fact that if the European Union, if the United states do not take a stand somebody else will come in, because it is a normal life. If there is a void in political life, it is going to be filled. It should be in the best interest of the European Union that this void does not exist in the first place.

Gordan Akrap

Yes, I agree completely with you. I am very sorry, but we are almost out of time. I think that these almost 100 minutes we did not use to only mention the problems. I see those challenges as a positive sign that we can use them and transfer them into positive signals and positive processes, which are going to be finished in several years.

Let me repeat what I said already: we in Croatia know that the process of joining the EU is a long process, but everything that you are going to do in that time is going to be beneficial for you in the end. And as Holger said – if we, as the European Union – are not going to take position and stand behind the activities that will support the unity and the creation of positive influences in these countries, not just as a group of countries, I agree that it could turn into much bigger problems. And my personal opinion is that we need to accept the position that we, as Croats asked for that in 2000 to support the accession process on individual level, not to join to those countries on regional level. Let us measure country by country, how they developed and then decide on what to do.

Holger Haibach

Yes. Thank you very much. I think this has been a very interesting discussion. Obviously, it is impossible in even ten hours' time to

go through all these complex things that we have been discussing right now. I would first of all like to say thank you to all the contributors, to all the speakers, thanks to my German colleagues, because today is a public holiday in Germany. Thank you very much for taking your time out on a holiday, where you should be with friends and family. I would like to say thank you to all the contributors from the region – I think it was very fruitful. What we could not discuss now, we definitely are going to discuss in future. As I said in the beginning. This is a series of talks and we would very much like to have all of you back on this episode of this series of conferences. Thank you very much.

Conference video is available at:

<https://www.kas.de/de/web/kroatien/veranstaltungsberichte/detail/-/content/kroatien-und-die-westbalkan-staaten-eu-perspektiven-montenegros-und-nord-mazedoniens>