

EU and Western Balkan states (WB6) – Serbia

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10:00 **Welcome and Introduction**

Holger Haibach

Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Zagreb

Gordan Akrap, PhD

Hybrid Warfare Research Institute

10.05 **Keynote Speaker**

Gordan Akrap, PhD

Hybrid Warfare Research Institute

10.10 **Discussion**

Norbert Beckmann-Dierkes, PhD

Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Belgrade

Zoran Dragišić, PhD

Parliament of Serbia

Nikola Lazić

Faculty of Political Sciences, Belgrade

Jeta Krasniqi

Kosovo Democratic Institute (KDI)

Hosts:

Holger Haibach

Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Zagreb

Gordan Akrap, PhD

Hybrid Warfare Research Institute

Holger Haibach

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to another conference in the series the EU and the West Balkan 6. This time we are looking at Serbia. I am very happy that we are again teaming up with Gordan Akrap from the Hybrid Warfare Research Institute. Gordan welcome! I am very happy that we can co-operate again. Over the last year we have covered seven countries of the Western Balkan region we have thoroughly covered the countries of the Western Balkan region and we have saved the best for the end of this year. I think everybody is aware that Serbia holds a key to a lot of challenges but has also demonstrated a lot of successes that are possible in the region. So it is very important to discuss Serbia and its relationship to the European Union and also to the neighbouring countries. Everybody knows that Serbia is very important, as there is a lot of interest of foreign actors, who are not originally from the region, but want to have an influence in this country and in its political landscape. I think that we have a lot of material for our discussion. Without any further ado, I would like to give the word to you Gordan to introduce us into the subject.

Gordan Akrap

Thank you Hoger. I would like to express my gratitude to all of you who are helping us to bring this to the end - or as we would say, the cherry on top. I like to say thank you especially to Jeta Krasniqi, who has decided to join us today, because she has to leave around 11, she has another meeting after that. Then, the member of the Parliament Zoran Dragišić is with us, and the colleague Zoran Lazić. I would like to give you a short Introduction, as always, into the subject. But before that, I would like to say that I am very proud to announce that we will be ready to publish the papers and presentations at the beginning of the next week.

These will be the papers and presentations from all the previous conferences. In about ten days we will be ready to publish the second part of this journal that will contain the topics that we covered last time, which is Kosovo, and now Serbia.

Now allow me a short Introduction that could be the basis for further discussion and comments.

Thinking about this brief analysis of Serbia as an introduction to the conference, I asked myself: can I be objective and impartial enough, given the fact that I actively participated as a volunteer in Croatia's Homeland War, initiated and imposed upon us by the former Yugoslavia and the Serbian leadership of that time. I am confident that I will adhere to political neutrality and that you are not going to see any bias in my words.

Serbia is, without any doubt, a state that holds the keys to stability and security in the entire WB6 area, directly or indirectly. Serbia, which can be seen from the so-called "Mini Schengen" agreement, can and should be the driver of positive economic and integration processes which must lead to an economic, and consequently political and cultural stabilization of WB6 area. Serbia, especially with respect to BiH, should learn from the examples of disintegration of the SFRY and other multinational socialist communities that have not resolved the accumulated problems associated with the various national entities living on their territory. That is the reason why relations between Belgrade and Priština must be resolved in a way which satisfies both conflicting parties. Quick solutions are very often not the ones that are sustainable in the long run. Especially not the ones which conceal the sources of further conflicts. Namely, Chapter 35 clearly states that the EU insists on the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo as a precondition for closing that

chapter, without which Serbia will not be able to join the EU. And Serbia wants to join the EU, by contrast to its opposition to NATO. Serbia, as well as other WB6 countries, is an area of serious geopolitical competitions of the USA, Russia, China, Turkey, some Arab countries (Saudi Arabia, Qatar...) and the EU. Russia uses its strong instruments of power (energy, financial and media policy) to impose its own will to the WB6 countries. China benefits from strong investments in critical infrastructure in the way in which they were doing it successfully for the last nearly 30 years in East and Central Africa (the consequences are already seen in the strong dependence of local communities and governments on China's financial and economic power). Turkey is also intensifying its activities towards Serbia, regardless of the conflicting interests of Turkey and Serbia in BiH.

The EU has been consistent in its activities, strongly helping and investing in Serbia. But without a publicly visible presence, we have often seen the opposite effect where these efforts were simply ignored and not accepted as fact by majority of the population.

Russia is trying to have a strong influence in Serbia and is, for now, succeeding in that, using Serbia as a space from which they are initiating their further activities in the region. By this I primarily have in view Montenegro, were Russia and Serbia were successful in changing the balance of power in Podgorica at the last elections. However, how fragile this cooperation is and how much Russia poses a threat to Serbia's stability, was shown by the violent protests on the streets of Belgrade in July this year. All indications show that Russian interests were behind those protests (integrating far left and far right political opposition in Serbia under one umbrella). The strong presence of Russian media in Serbia and the widespread network of local and national media that indiscriminately spread their information (primarily

using Sputnik as a source) impose the need not only for Serbia, but also for the EU and NATO, to face the threat of intensive disinformation campaigns in national and international public sphere.

Croatia wants a stable and safe Serbia. Serbia's political leadership needs to understand that the factors whom Serbia succeeded to change, I would say in a semi-violent way, for instance looking at the political landscape in Montenegro in the last ten years, are now working against the Serbian leadership. Also, Serbia needs to realize that it is surrounded by EU and NATO member states and that Serbia's future lies in Euro-Atlantic integration. Serbia must primarily turn towards itself and its capacities and internal challenges which it faces, without searching for the source of its problems in others, for example in Croatia. This is especially interesting when such an explanation is publicly advocated as a justification for arming Serbia. Personally, I think that this accelerated arming is more harmful for Serbia itself than for other countries. Although it has procured many different weapons for all the branches of its army, by analysing the economic situation, we see that Serbia currently does not pose an objective threat to any of its neighbours, particularly to Croatia and other NATO member states or those that have NATO and US military bases on their territory - and these are all other WB6 countries.

The problem of WB6, but also in Serbia's neighbouring countries, is a process of internal and external political radicalization which are endangering relations with other communities and countries. Constant political provocations to introduce tensions at the international level with the aim of diverting the attention of the domestic public from serious domestic political and economic issues, often leads to targeted radicalized political reactions in other environments. By initiating such reactions, they justify their own radical attitudes among their own local public and destabilize

targeted foreign governments. Conditions are being created for the strengthening of very dangerous and destructive populism in a state that is the subject of strong hybrid conflict. A good example of such an action are Serbia's activities aimed at encouraging politically radical attitudes in Croatia, Montenegro and especially in Kosovo.

The issue of a secure, stable and sustainable future of WB6 states is directly related to the education and creation of responsible political elites which must turn to their own problems and resolve them in cooperation with their neighbours as well as multinational organizations such as the EU and NATO. Building stable societies in a gradual, consistent and truthful way, solving the accumulated problems, creating a culture of dialogue and cooperation, strengthening awareness of EU affiliation regardless of religious and ethnic differences represents, in my view, a path to be followed in facing the challenges that have been building up for centuries both in Serbia and others the WB6 region.

Thank you very much for listening to my contribution so far. I hope it was provocative enough to elicit your comments on this topic. Holger...

Holger Haibach

Thank you very much Gordan for your introduction. I think you gave us sufficient food for thought and also for discussion. I would now like to welcome Jeta Krasniqi from the Kosovo Democratic Institute. Thank you for being with us again and thank you for making yourself available today. I know you have other commitments later today and this is why we put you as the first on the speakers' list. Gordan mentioned that the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia is obviously one of the most

important issues when it comes to Serbia's rapprochement with the European Union.

Could you share with you some of your thoughts on how you see the relation between the two countries and how you see the current situation in Serbia?

Jeta Krasniqi

Thank you very much, it is a pleasure to be here. I was actually looking for words of welcome from my counterpart from Serbia and then to react. Well maybe I will share a few thoughts now and then leave room for my colleagues from Serbia. As you rightly said, the Kosovo-Serbia issue, in particular the negotiation process, is one of the keys for European integration, and this holds true for both countries. These processes started in 2011 with discussions on technical issues, then moving to political issues and now for nearly three years we have been in the final stage of reaching what was called the legally binding agreement, a comprehensive act which will deal with all the open issues of the two countries ambitious to attain EU accession.

We have to see how the process has evolved to the point of what has been achieved, what are the current challenges, but also what we want, and what are the prospects. We can say that in this period a number of agreements have been made and also implemented. In spite of all the problems, there has been some success, there is no denying it, in the implementation of nearly 34 agreements reached by the two countries and in the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia in general. So, are we closer to normalization now, in 2020, then we were in 2011? It is not an easy question. Maybe we could say yes, from a certain perspective. But if we ask ourselves where we want to see ourselves in ten years, then my answer has to be no, as the progress was not as expected. Serious talks on a final agreement

have taken place, especially during last year when we had a special US envoy Richard Grenell appointed, as well as the EU special envoy Mr Lajčak. It was apparent to me that these talks may take a few months to reach the final agreement between the two parties. But I think what has been missing in all these conversations is what are the objectives of the whole process. We keep on seeking normalization, but normalization means two entirely different things for the two peoples – one meaning for Kosovo and another for Serbia. Also, to some extent, it has a different meaning within the EU, due to the fact that the EU has a neutral position towards Kosovo and that Kosovo has not been recognised by five EU members. This means that the EU envoy Lajčak will advocate normalization in one way, while it means something very different for Germany. When Germany goes public it says that normalization means mutual recognition and that this should be the end goal.

I guess what we need to do is to clearly define what we want to achieve with this agreement. The final goal is not the agreement per se, but we must have this substantial exchange to clarify what are the objectives that we want to achieve through the normalization process. From my point of view, if we talk about normalization, I would say we need to deal with the past events that transpired between Kosovo and Serbia. We have to recognize the crimes committed, we need to have forgiveness, we have obtain satisfaction for all the victims in Kosovo, as that war was not a thing of individuals, it was initiated by the Milošević regime, and made possible by his military and paramilitary forces. Recognizing what has happened is a very important start on the way to reconciliation and peace that we want. For me that means normalization in the first place.

At the same time, we have to see how to deal with the open issues that we have between the two countries, and how to overcome

the barrier that Serbia still has in not feeling ready to recognize Kosovo. I guess that for the benefit of normalization we have to face reality and reality, from my perspective, is here where I stand in Kosovo. But at the same time, I think normalization should imply a consolidation in the international arena regarding Kosovo and thus opening the next chapter. And opening this next chapter will be difficult if we keep on denying what has happened and reverting to nationalistic rhetoric or having a situation where there are more words than deeds. We need leaders who have the courage and the vision to actually face what has happened, and to push the two countries closer to building a lasting peace. Peace is not necessarily the absence of war, that is certain. For me normalization means sustainability, EU integration, reconciliation, and a new future for the next generation. Do we all agree on that, I do not know. Are we trying? Definitely. Do we have the right leaders? They might be making an attempt at discussions, but I have a strong feeling, and I think the speakers here from Serbia might be more appropriate to talk about that, but my feeling is that that at the moment Serbia is not entirely willing to push forward to achieve that final normalization agreement that would have mutual recognition as one of its goals.

Apparently, Serbia's goal of EU accession and closing Chapter 35 does not seem to be enough. Serbia wants to get something from Kosovo, something which it could give to its public, to be able to say - I gained this in exchange for recognizing Kosovo. This, of course, will always be a compromise, and I think it was the topic of many discussions in Brussels. We often say that this should be a win-win situation and that both parts should derive benefit from it. Gordan mentioned Bosnia before. For me as a member of the Kosovo society, I recognize that negotiations entail compromises, but at the same time I am aware that we do not need an agreement that would make Kosovo a dysfunctional state, or to have copy-situation of Bosnia with clusters of ethnic

communities. Kosovo is a multi-ethnic state, it is a civic state. Through this agreement – with this I wish to conclude – we should preserve the functionality of Kosovo as a multi-ethnic state, and at the same time build peaceful relations with Serbia and close the chapter of the past. We have a situation of two partners moving ahead within this region on the European integration path. I will leave it at this and of course I am open for comments. Thank you.

Holger Haibach

Thank you very much for your input. I think you gave us a well-balanced view of the interest of the people of Kosovo and showed us a little bit of this way forward which is to have constructive dialogue between the different countries in the region. I would like to warn everybody now that I am going to switch to German, because I will now talk to my colleague Norbert Beckman who is now in Belgrade.

Dear Norbert, I think, as far as I can see from the history of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, you are in a unique position, because you are currently responsible for four countries in the region due to a change in staff - namely for Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Northern Macedonia. Of course, that provides you an almost unique overview of the political landscape. Of course, it also holds true that if you are responsible for Serbia and Kosovo at the same time, that you obtain a special view of the entire situation. Two years ago, when the discussion about the land swap was on the agenda, I had the impression that a solution might be closer than it seems to be at the moment. Could you describe the situation a bit, please - on the one hand concerning politics in Serbia and on the other hand how do you see the neighbourly relations between Serbia and surrounding countries?

Norbert Beckmann

It is a great honour to be at the fifth joint conference today, to be able to speak about the experiences in Serbia. I am happy that also Jeta is there. Last time we got along well, even though we didn't agree. That's why it is a good thing that we do these formats. I am grateful to Gordan as he is continuously urging that we maintain this dialogue in the countries of the Western Balkans. I am very happy to see everyone here and I wish you a warm welcome. We have never met in person, but we should manage to do that sometime in Belgrade.

Now about the situation in Serbia, or rather, in Serbia and the surrounding area. The most important keywords that define Serbia have already been mentioned - it is and will remain the EU integration process and the relationship to the so-called external powers - China, Russia and Turkey. This is something that is mentioned again and again. I would like to emphasize once again that in terms of political action and also in foreign policy strategy, the European Union is Serbia's most important partner in terms of facts. A look at the map shows us that without close ties and cooperation with the European Union and also with other states of the European Union, Serbia cannot fulfil its political role at all. Allow me to quote some numbers from the German perspective: around 65,000 jobs in Serbia are directly related to investments from German or German-run companies, and these numbers are increasing. If I take a look at that over the past five years, we have gone from 20,000 or 25,000 jobs to 65,000 in the meantime. That is a large investment volume and it is interesting for me that this is not only the contracted manufacturing, but there are also value-adding jobs with development potentials. Let us take a look at the entire automotive sector, where not only cable harnesses are built, but also complete safety-relevant components. They are

developed, built and tested, not just for the European market, but also worldwide.

It is beyond dispute that there is a close connection to Russia, which, however, takes place predominantly in the mental area. Personally, I love to read. So, after rereading Anna Karenina it became very clear to me why Serbia and Russia are so strongly bonded. It has to do with the fact that a kind of brotherhood, a partnership has developed due to history, tradition, and a common cultural understanding. It is much less economic or security-related. Of course, Russia has a great interest in establishing contacts with Serbia in order to exert influence on the security policy and if Serbia would become a NATO member, in terms of foreign policy for Russia it would mean – maybe not a disaster - but surely a lapse. However, if you look at the numbers, there are more joint exercises with NATO forces than with Russian forces, which I find a very interesting fact. Russia's influence in the media is great, undisputed, and consideration must also be given to that. On the economic side, although Russia is an economic power, their impact on Serbia remains small. If you ask students where do they see their future, they don't see it in Russia, but in the European Union. That is also a question of how the future of one's own country is perceived (provided you want to stay in your own country). The brain drain, the emigration of qualified people in particular, is one of the greatest challenges in Serbia.

China as a major partner is seen by many as a terrible scenario. China exerts a massive influence and it does not care about values that we in the European Union and in Europe in general consider to be crucial to political normality. In addition to its political input, China is primarily interested in trade. At this moment it has a majority stake in the port of Piraeus, Greece, and it also wants to spread to Albania and much appreciates the central location of Serbia. In addition, there is a clearly recognizable political

friendship – China is seen as a close partner, one that is acquiring more and more influence both economically and politically in this overall context. This is the project well known to us - the new Silk Road. I always like to stress, however, that we should not see the Silk Road as a one-way road, but as a two-lane road, where Europe can also do its part. Serbia is a central point here in the Western Balkans and, of course, you have to look carefully to see how Serbian foreign policy is conducted and to what extent it is in accordance with the foreign policy of the European Union. Especially when it comes to the influence of China in terms of content.

I am leaving Turkey aside today, because Turkey has so many problems of its own. What it has set out as a foreign policy goal three or four years ago, I do not see as currently having major importance. We will have to see how it develops in the long run. The relationships between the two countries are good, but currently not crucial from my perspective.

The decisive point, on which Serbia is repeatedly being scrutinized, is precisely the EU accession process and here the decisive issue is the relationship and normalization process with Kosovo. We have seen some movement in this field since the change of government in Priština at the beginning of 2020, when all of the trade tariffs have been abolished. This has been an important precondition for further negotiations, and, in my opinion, we have returned to the starting positions of the Brussels Agreement and now it is all a matter of fulfilling these conditions to the end. The question remains, however, who is the political contact person in Priština. Of course, it is formally the government, but who is powerful enough to get things done? Because I think it is now clear to everyone that normalization at the end of the day means that there must be a recognition in order to drive this process forward. The goal is to achieve Serbia's

EU membership in the end. On the domestic front, this is not very easy, and consideration must be given to what I have just explained – the relationship to Russia. The recognition of Kosovo is far from gaining majority support in Serbia and the question is do the political forces there have enough time to work towards it?

In Serbia itself, this year we had the elections, which the opposition, as is well known, has partly boycotted. Other opposition options, despite the lowering of the parliamentary threshold, have not managed to enter parliament, although they have a voting potential that goes definitely up to 15 or 20 %. This fragmentation of the opposition into small groups was celebrated by many in the public. That also showed that, if this is the interpretation of the democratic rules of the game, then I believe I do not wish to sit any longer at the political table. There are currently six members of the Serbian Parliament none of whom has been appointed in the government.

This situation implies, on the other hand, that there is more than sufficient majority to move things ahead a lot in political terms, and the responsibility to do so now rests both with the Parliament and the government. Personally, I think - although I know that has been a lot of criticism – that to declare early elections in two years' time is justified and also a wise decision. Because a parliamentary system that takes place almost without parliamentary opposition cannot work. This offer that has been made, despite all the criticism, I think is a fair one towards the opposition parties, to consolidate themselves in order to be able to take part in parliamentary proceedings again. That is also a question, as Jeta said, and Gordan too, of leading responsible politics, of taking democracy seriously and getting on the track to the EU and at the same time making inroads towards a transformation process within Serbia itself. Assuming what I just said, it is obvious to me that we need people here who will take

responsibility, become candidates in the electoral process and use a clearly identifiable agenda to push the whole thing forward in the direction in which Serbia intends to go.

Allow me to underline once again the Kosovo question, as it is probably the most difficult question from the European accession perspective. There is now an opportunity to act on both sides; it is not just up to Serbia, but also up to Kosovo, and we must seriously examine to which extent the European perspective is being pursued politically, in order to join forces and become a part of the European Union.

One last point. It is interesting for me that there are two different levels of political perception: one that we are discussing more or less in public and the other one which is proving workable too. By this I mean the Western Balkan Transport Community, various cultural activities and so on, where six partners sit equally at the table as part of the Berlin Process and find reasonable political solutions there. I believe this is a good approach to finding joint solutions for the future in terms of factual policy and technical cooperation. Of course, in this process we also address the relevance of the European Union, as it is clear that the accession process must not be put aside, although the credibility of the European Union had shrunk. If I look at the drafts of the new reports now, especially related to Northern Macedonia and Kosovo, but also Serbia, I get the impression that the hurdles in the accession process, though not new, are nevertheless placed so high that I cannot help thinking that this process will take a very long time which is not good for the region and also for the European Union.

Holger Haibach

Thank you, dear Norbert, for your overview. Before I briefly delve into the content of what you just shared, thank you again for being with us so often in this series of talks. This is also due to the special situation regarding the staff here at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, but anyhow, your input is always very welcome and highly competent. I think you were right to say that the European Union also has a certain obligation to do certain things. We saw how agonizing it was to start accession negotiations with Northern Macedonia and Albania, and I think it is largely due to the fact that there is still no vision within the European Union, no clear idea of what we actually want to do with the region. It makes the entire situation of course all the more difficult because, on the one hand, it invites external actors you just named to take advantage here and, on the other hand, it also has the effect on the credibility of the European Union which visibly suffers from this lack of vision.

I will switch back to English now and I would like to welcome Professor Zoran Dragišić. Thank you very much for being with us. You have been with us at the first conference, so allow me to welcome you back. I am very happy that you have made yourself available because you are also in a very unique position, being a politician and a professor at the Faculty of Security Studies in Belgrade at the same time. Please, can you give us your view on the situation in Serbia in relationship to its neighbours?

Zoran Dragišić

Thank you for the invitation. Allow me to continue my talk in Serbian. I absolutely agree with what I heard from my colleague Jeta and also from Akrap, which is that the situation in the Balkans - as the area is being called in Southeast Europe - largely depends

on Serbia as the largest country in the region, and one which has the greatest impact on the surrounding states. In any case, we are aware of all the facets of our situation, and of the high responsibility lies upon us concerning the entire region. There are a few things that matter. There is an ongoing issue between Belgrade and Pristina, as my colleague Krasniqi has already detailed. The negotiations, as we know, have been going on for quite a long time with varying degrees of success. I am satisfied that this process is politically stable at the moment, because at least at the moment there is no war.

Colleague Krasniqi said one thing which I agree with, and that is that peace does not mean mere absence of war, an absence of armed conflict. I believe that the relations between us must be raised to a much higher level, which is a matter of policy and also of specific decisions. In any case, very brave steps must be taken in all areas. I think that we have a terrible problem in Kosovo, and we are always trying to solve this problem with the same philosophy which created it in the first place, in other words, we are constantly repeating the same procedures and expect different results. It is not only the fault of the Serbs and the Albanians. I think that the European Union is to be blamed here as well, by which I do not wish to imply any single country of the Union.

There are processes under way which are seemingly unrelated, although in reality this is not so. Brexit, that is, Britain's exit from the European Union has significantly weakened the confidence in the European Union. This has not only occurred within the countries of the Western Balkans, but that trust has eroded within the European Union itself. While the European Union has been preoccupied with its own problems, other countries have filled the void in different ways. We in Serbia have no reason to be dissatisfied with economic cooperation with the European Union.

On the contrary, European Union is our largest economic partner, our largest donor, the largest number of investments comes from the EU countries and over 90% of our total economic exchange is with the EU and countries of our immediate surroundings. From that point of view, we have a great cooperation.

On the other hand, open political issues, such as that of relations between Belgrade and Priština cannot be solved without a fuller participation of the European Union, especially in view of the fact that Serbia sees itself in the family of European nations, and the European Union membership is our strategic goal. We want to solve the problems in the region primarily with the help of the European Union and based on European principles. In this sense, the so-called Little Schengen initiative, which involves the countries of the Western Balkans, is a very good initiative and I think it will bring many benefits to all countries in the region. Above all, we will practice establishing mutual relations on the same principles on which the European Union operates. This is a benefit not only for the region, but for the European Union as well, because the countries of the region will be better prepared to join the European Union. In addition, through economic cooperation, we will significantly strengthen our economies and pave way for our European partners to engage in more significant investments. Our idea is not to be dependent on the European family for decades, on the contrary, we want to be a Balkan country which will be contribute something to Europe, not go on receiving donations and humanitarian aid. We want to be a country where others will invest in order to make money. We also want our companies to enter the European market and profit from that market. Our idea is not to be at the periphery of Europe, but to become equal members of the European family.

The negotiations between Belgrade and Priština should be conducted in this spirit. We must be open for completely new

ways to look at things. Because obviously the carrot and stick motivation has not proven to be the best. I often hear both from Belgrade and Priština that the final agreement which we are looking for should only be a beginning for other developments. With this sequence of events I strongly disagree. I think that the final agreement that should be reached between Belgrade and Priština, hopefully any time soon, should be the outcome of all the other efforts on the ground, of all the steps undertaken in economic cooperation, cultural cooperation and educational cooperation. We should not wait for some final agreement to be reached first, and only then to proceed with other actions.

Looking at Bosnia and Herzegovina, we can extract some lessons learned from the Dayton Agreement formula. It was an agreement which, of course, ended the war. Fortunately, the war in Kosovo ended 20 years ago and today we have a situation that this war is behind us. But in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is the Dayton Agreement which ended the war, armed hostilities, but did not establish peace. This additional step towards integration, towards the establishment of a normal society in Bosnia and Herzegovina, has not taken place. No further thought was given to how Bosnia and Herzegovina should continue to function as a state.

So it is very important for us now to establish functional relations between Belgrade and Priština. I am always bothered when the issue of recognizing or not recognizing Kosovo is posed as a key issue from which we are supposed to start. I think that is a completely wrong approach. We cannot start negotiations with what we do not agree upon. If we set out to resolve what we disagree on, we will never get to what we agree. I think we have to start with the issues we agree on, such as not making problems for the other side. The introduction of a 100% customs duty on goods from Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was later

abolished, cannot be seen as a condition for new negotiations, and so on. Definitely, we had a lot of problems in these negotiations, but that is why we are here, to solve these problems. I believe we must approach this issue with a completely different philosophy and that the European Union needs to change its position significantly. Very good news for the entire Western Balkans is that Northern Macedonia and Albania have started their accession negotiations. This is extremely good news for the whole region, which makes me very happy, and I believe that tomorrow in the Serbian Parliament we will pass a law ratifying the agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Council of Ministers of Albania, according to which we will be able to travel between Serbia and Albania with only an ID card, which should, in my mind, significantly facilitate communication between the two peoples. The highway intended to connect Serbia with the Albanian coast is also a very important thing. The construction of highways, just as developing all forms of economic cooperation is very important. I am saddened at the thought that there are no Albanian students from Kosovo and Metohija studying at the Belgrade University, just as I would like to see our students studying at the University of Priština. I would gladly host colleagues from Pristina to give lectures at the Belgrade University, just as I myself would go to Priština to lecture with great pleasure. Really, very little has been done in this area, in the cooperation of the academic communities, just as in cultural cooperation. At the beginning, of course, all of this will have its problems, but we should work on these beginnings.

Let me remind you of the cultural festivals that took place in Belgrade and were attacked by members of the extreme right wing. In the first year it was almost scandalous to have Albanian artists performing in Belgrade, in the second year the surprise was lesser and in the end it will become normal. So we must always take those first steps, and there the role of the European Union is

irreplaceable. When we talk about the influence – with this I wish to conclude - of non-European factors, as far as we are concerned the influence of the United States is welcome. We are establishing better and better relations with the United States, and I think that the Euro-Atlantic partnership is also a good perspective for Serbia.

Speaking of the Russian influence, it does not manifest itself as a positive influence. This means that, as a rule, we do not have any donations from Russia, they are non-existent, neither do we have any major investments. Norbert spoke of irrational relationships. But it should be borne in mind that Russia is trying to return to Europe as a great power and this is of course completely legitimate - everyone is trying to have as much influence as possible. This influence in Serbia is manifested in the way Gordan described it, and I really have nothing to add or deduct from it. It is manifested through the media, through certain narratives that have little to do with reality. For instance, if you ask someone today about the vaccine - there was a poll in Serbia on that matter - no one seems thrilled to receive a Russian vaccine, everyone would prefer vaccine developed in Germany or the UK. Nobody wants to drive a Lada Niva car, everyone drives a Volkswagen.

When asked where you would like to emigrate - because we have many people emigrating from Serbia - no one goes to Russia, people go to Germany, Austria and Sweden mostly. So in principle, this Russian thing is a narrative. As I said - no one drives a Russian car, everyone drives a German car. In that sense, it bothers me when someone talks about some horrific closeness and Slavic unity between Serbs and Russians, because Croatians are incomparably closer to us and Montenegrins are almost identical people. There are also Bulgarians who are also very close to us. They say that it is because they are all Orthodox, and it is true that Bulgarians are Orthodox, as well as the Greeks and Montenegrins, too. My bottom line is I do not see any special

connection between Serbs and Russians which does not exist between Serbs and some other peoples with whom at the moment we do not have the best of relationships. In matters of politics, I wish to stress that whenever the European Union withdraws from the Western Balkans, whenever it is inactive, a void is created and that is what the administration in Brussels needs to know. Of course, Europe is our goal, membership in the European Union is our strategic goal, but bilateral relations with Germany, Italy and Austria, which are our most important economic partners, deliver much more results at the moment. So, in general, I think that the European Union should support primarily the negotiations between Belgrade and Priština, but there should be clear understanding that a recognition of the independence of Kosovo cannot be set as a condition. A stronger European Union presence in the Western Balkans will in any case ensure a better position for both the European Union and all the countries of the Western Balkans.

Holger Haibach

Thank you very much, professor Dragišić for your input. I would like to take up on what you have said, that we need perhaps a new approach when it comes to the region and the European Union and how they can come closer together. Also what Norbert said – on a working level, things are working out pretty well between the WB 6 countries and the idea of the Mini-Schengen also seems to fly, so there are things that might take us forward. I would like to give the word now to Mr Nikola Lazić from the Centre for Social Research in Belgrade. Mr Lazić, I would like to hear your thoughts on what could be done on the side of the European Union to improve the situation in the region and your views on the current situation in Serbia.

Nikola Lazić

Let me follow up on what Professor Dragišić said, I do share his opinion. Let me start with the European Union and Serbia, and then I shall talk about the relations in the region. As for the European Union, I think that the European Union does not plan to expand soon, there must first be a consolidation and a certain type of repositioning within the European Union itself, especially after the Brexit, but also the coronavirus pandemic. In my view, the whole region of the Western Balkans must enter the European Union together. I do not believe that Serbia will enter the European Union individually and that our development will be judged individually, no, it will be jointly. Serbia will enter the European Union with at least three other countries – together with Montenegro and Albania, to begin with. Mini-Schengen is not an alternative to the European Union, but a path to the European Union. Mini-Schengen is a good thing that can point out areas of cooperation, to move away, as Professor Dragišić said, from the things that separate us. Why do we necessarily have to talk about mutual recognition? Why do we have to start immediately from the topics that separate us?

I think we should start from the topics that unite us, and in that way make our economic relations and common economic prosperity a priority. If we see that we live much better together, that together we can have a bigger economic market, that we can place more goods in that economic market and in the market of the European Union, surely that is better than the prevailing thinking in Serbia and in rest of the region which says 'let the neighbour's cow die' . That is the way they think - instead of hoping for better conditions in Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, because whatever is better for them, is in turn better for us; we are all part of that region and none of us can stand out. For example, if I say "I want to see Serbia

develop, who cares about the others?”, it is very bad. Equally bad for any country which thinks that way.

I often go to Albania and I spend my summers there, and I have a house in Ulcinj, Montenegro - it is an Albanian-speaking area. I have a lot of Albanian friends, almost as many as Serbian friends. We always find points that connect us, we always find something that connects us, whether education, a joint project we work on, no matter what - there is always something that connects us. Young people in the region collaborate through knowledge sharing, through education and through university collaboration. Why should I not go on an exchange to Tirana, or someone from Tirana to Belgrade? Why should I not go to the University of Priština as a doctoral student or the other way around? I think these are the topics which the European Union should emphasize. The European Union should emphasize the creation of a mutual network, including the construction of roads, creation of a common economic interest, instead of starting off from facts that have been points of disagreement for so long. I think that if Serbia is presented with a policy that we must recognize Kosovo as an independent state, it will not resonate positively in the society at large, and also the political elites will not promote unpopular moves, as politically such moves could prove very costly. The European Union could invest more energy and should emphasize mutual cooperation that will bring something good to both the second and the third party, and not immediately start with the main topic. Also, in the relationship between Belgrade and Priština, I believe that there should be compromises - both sides should be ready to give up something, for the sake of a higher goal.

I think that current perception within the European Union and America too is wrong, somehow it is not going to further reconciliation and mutual progress. I have heard announcements

that Madeleine Albright will be involved again in the negotiations between Belgrade and Priština, which for us means a return of the spirits of the past, something that might lead to conflicts again. I also agree with Professor Dragišić on the issue of Russia's influence in Serbia, that this influence is not significant. This closeness is mostly promoted through the media and reflects perhaps some heroic themes as part of the tradition, but divorced from reality. We have greater cultural exchange with Turkey, and our neighbours, than we have with Russia. We do most of the business with the European Union. I think that both the public and the political elites in the region should find a way to shift their political agendas and accept that they can prosper more through cooperation - both the societies as a whole, as well as the political elites.

Holger Haibach

Thank you very much Mr Lazić for your insight. I would like now to open the second round and pose one question to every speaker and after that we will most probably be at the end of our conference. I would like to take what Mr Lazić has just said which is that if we really want to solve the problems between Kosovo and Serbia, some compromises will have to be made, and these compromises could be painful for either side. So it naturally falls on the two governments and the two political landscapes to convince the population in their respective countries to find solutions. So that would be my question to Ms Krasniqi: What could be the role of the European Union in facilitating negotiations?

Jeta Krasniqi

A few things before I go to the question of what the EU can do. I do agree that we have to stick to the common areas where we

can find mutual understanding, where we can cooperate together. I think that is how the dialogue process was conceived in 2011, by talking on technical issues, and the idea was to leave the politics aside. But what we have realized in the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, facilitated by the EU, is that everything is politics - even the recognition of diplomas. We cannot agree to implement the diploma agreement because it is about politics. We have a problem and we can either choose to circumvent it, refusing to acknowledge it, or we can have visionary courageous leaders on both sides who will face the problem and try to solve it. Mr Lazić said that it is politically costly in Serbia to tell the population that in this process we need to recognize Kosovo. Well it is, but it has to be done. And leaders are there, no matter where, in Serbia or Kosovo or in any part of Europe, or any part of the world, they are there to take tough decisions, that is why the citizens elect them - to take those tough decisions and lead the vision of a country. Our choice is to either protect the position of a certain politician, because some decisions could be costly for him or his political group, or we as a society will move on to actually deal with the issues, with whatever problem is there and try to solve it. We can go on with this, repeating that we are looking for a common ground and pretend that we are solving the problem. But ten years have passed since the negotiation processes have started and we have not been able to solve many of the problems that we have. We still have many disagreements on all the agreements reached, they cannot be implemented – one example I gave is the diploma. It is not being implemented.

It is very good to have exchanges, as Professor Dragišić said, but then the problem is how do you recognize diplomas that the Priština University will award to students from Serbia, or for a student from Kosovo who will receive his diploma from the University of Belgrade? We have a number of students with valid

diplomas, who completed their studies at University of Priština, but Serbia does not recognize these diplomas, so they cannot get a job there. I am always for cooperation but let us not blind ourselves to the problems that are there, and let us solve them. Exchanges, yes, but let us try to do them. That is why I pointed out the fact that we need to understand what we want to do. We can say – ok, this is not a final agreement, this is an agreement that leads us to other agreements and maybe paves way and has a role towards reaching the final agreement. But if this is a final agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, then we need boldness, we need vision and courage and I expect to see that kind of courage from the leadership in Serbia. But that, of course, is my expectation as a citizen of the state of Kosovo. I can only ask and encourage the citizens of Serbia to put the same request to their government, but that is ultimately their choice of how they want to handle the situation.

Again - it is politics and it would be wonderful if in these past ten years we would have encouraged and normalized relations, but what has happened in these ten years? We have not done that. Prof. Dragišić mentioned the tariffs and the reciprocity measures. O.k., the tariffs were imposed, but the question is, why was it done in the first place? Because we had a policy from the state of Serbia that actively lobbied against the recognition of Kosovo as a state and its membership in international organizations. So now we can say – o.k., let us accept that Serbia doesn't want to recognize Kosovo, but does it have to take active measures to actually block it? Because, if you are taking active measures to block it, it means you are not in favour of normalizing the relations. So we can either choose to go round and round for another 20 years and say – o.k., let us do it step by step and maybe some better relations will follow, or we can say: ok, we have tried for ten years. We have agreements, most of them are not implemented. What do we want to do? Do we want to have the

next generation talking again about the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue as an unsolved issue, or do we want to solve it?

I am a fan of problem-solving and I always try to look ahead. When it comes to what the EU can do, I think that the EU needs to take a bolder stand. Now I understand that – as I said before for Serbia - it is necessary for Kosovo to be recognized, but it takes more than only that. I completely agree with what Mr Lazić said – we want our neighbouring countries to have a rule of law, we want them to have justice, freedom of the media, we want opposition in the parliament, because the greater the number of democratic countries that surround us, the better it is for us as well. I think that the EU should show greater courage in requesting and pinpointing what normalization means, but at the same time I think the EU should retreat from what we have seen so far and search for stability and to extend the applicability being on the expands of the rule of law, freedom of the media and freedom of association.

If we look at the region, there has been a move closer to the EU, except, of course, for Kosovo, which still does not have an EU perspective – in spite of the documents and the EU rhetoric - but tangibly this perspective is not there, because Kosovo has not been recognized by five EU countries. I repeat, the region generally has moved closer to the EU, but its democracy has not kept pace with this movement. So we have a problem there and I think that the EU should take a closer look at it. It is not only stability that is important, but also it is to have the rule of law, the fight against corruption, organised crime, freedom of the media, freedom of association and pluralism. We cannot pretend that the region is having a state that is not developing, they are actually becoming autocrats. Many times, in many discussions, I was asked the question: what do you like more - to have a country where Vučić has the whole power, or do you prefer a situation as in

Kosovo where there is such lack of political consensus? My honest answer is - I prefer lack of political consensus to the situation where one man has all the power, because that situation runs against building democracy, it goes towards the creation of an autocratic state. But that is, of course, my view from here, from Kosovo and this is how I see the region evolving. Thank you very much. I wanted to hear the remarks of the colleagues from Serbia. These were my reflections.

Holger Haibach

Thank you very much for your strong statement and I would like to take that, and I am going to switch to German again to ask Norbert a question. Norbert, there was now a lot of talk about the need for courageous decisions and visions and courageous politicians. The question I ask myself is: Serbia has had stable political conditions for several years, with a strong president. I mean that this is the least one can say. When I look at the situation in Kosovo, it is much more “unstable” and that also applies to other countries, such as Montenegro, where there has now been a change of government after a very long time. That is why I ask myself the question, which political conditions actually have to prevail and which political leaders or what kind of characteristics are they supposed to have in order to actually establish the process of rapprochement in the region and in particular between Serbia and Kosovo?

Norbert Beckmann

Thank you Holger for the question. It's a question that goes to the core of feasibility. Yes, courageous decisions is probably just the right keyword. Courageous decisions mean that someone says that we want to promote the recognition of Kosovo from the Serbian side on the basis of a partnership or whatever. What I

meant in my opening statement was that we have a close cooperation level where that works. But there are always problems, also in everyday life, like the one that was mentioned - the question of the recognition of the university diploma. But there are solutions that can be found for this. The authorities are also interested, as well as the involved stakeholders, that people can live together. This is a laborious business, it is not a sure-fire success, everything has to be done. On another level, the day-to-day business works quite well, everything that is not necessarily government business.

I believe that what we need is important persuasion work - and that will take time - because Kosovo is not just some part somewhere in Europe, no, we have to understand that Kosovo, as part of the preamble to the Serbian constitution, belongs to the national territory from the Serbian point of view and if so, now the president, as a state representative, is supposed to say "... then we'll just recognize that!" He would violate the constitution by doing that. No one in Europe can ask anyone to violate the constitution as an elected president. On the other hand, it is sometimes very quiet when we have the opposition parties, which are not present in the parliament at the moment, but also now outside the parliament on the Kosovo question and they are very, very little. I think that we must work much more towards a national consensus in order to achieve in Serbia a certain level of understanding for normalization, as most members of the European Union understand the neighbours, and also as it is understood by the Americans, and that takes time. This topic needs to be discussed much more intensively and I am convinced that it will also work in everyday life. It is important that no additional hurdles are created, but that hurdles are removed.

The economy that works here is indeed a good example. They try to work together the best they can and take that as an example,

where people notice that when conditions will normalize, everyone benefits. This can also be used to create majorities. And a very important aspect is, of course, the security aspect. The concern that the sites which are important for the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo are not safe, must be resolved. I believe that the European Union and the Americans can make a very significant contribution here to ensuring that there is also trust for securing religiously important sites. One can withdraw to a formal legal position. Both states are secular states, so that can be regulated according to legalistic principles. Emotionally, we know that this is a different matter and here we need a much, much stronger building of trust, a much, much stronger discussion. One should say, o.k., this feeling of uncertainty, which is currently not proven by reality, we can guarantee that.

Holger Haibach

Thank you dear Norbert for showing us another way, from a different perspective. I would like to take what Norbert has said to ask Professor Dragišić a question. But before, please may I ask you to switch off your translation function and the zoom programme, so that we can hear you and the translation. My question: would you sustain the idea of Norbert, who said that if we create enough soft power, enough soft topics to get things underway, like the economy, like tourism, like freedom of movement, securing religious places and all these kinds of things. Do you think that this gives enough political drive to get also the political process under way quicker than it has been the case until now?

Zoran Dragišić

Yes, I believe that that is exactly the strength of Europe, the soft power, which is nevertheless a kind of power, and I believe that

we can solve the relations between Serbs and Albanians with a better understanding and work in the field of education, which we have already talked about. In this sense, the European Union can help us a lot. I agree with Jeta that this is more or less politics in our country - whatever you start is a political issue. Whether it is a question of cultural festivals whether it is a question of the football players from Serbia and their match, Montenegrin citizens who should play for Montenegro against Kosovo and similar situations. Politics appears in some places where you absolutely cannot expect it. This is on the one hand, and on the other hand we are talking about the fact that the problem is that many of these agreements, that have been reached so far, have not been implemented. One of the most important is the Community of Serbian Municipalities where we see that there is nothing. We are now talking about diplomas, which is not such a big problem, it can be solved very easily, but the Community of Serbian Municipalities is a big problem - since it was agreed it stands as one of the most important topics for Serbia and the entire Serbian community in Kosovo and Metohija.

So, generally speaking, these problems push us always back to the beginning. We actually have to work far more on that soft power, on understanding each other - of course it is not easy at all. I am not naive to believe that we could just show up in Kosovo or that Albanians could come here to Belgrade and say "... everything is great, we love each other a lot now!" That way it will not work. But I think that economic cooperation, cultural cooperation is good. Also, Serbian tourists going for holidays to the Albanian sea can do a lot, as well as the export of our goods through Albanian ports. This can achieve much more than futile endless meetings that have not brought much, they even have led to more misunderstanding, than to understanding.

It started with the recognition of Kosovo. If the only point in the negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo is that Kosovo has to be recognized, then I do not know why we are talking at all. Then those conversations are absolutely pointless. If the only topic of those talks is the recognition of the independence of Kosovo, we in Serbia are not prepared to do that. I have to tell you that right away. First of all, if I should be the one to do that, if I should make a decision on the independence of Kosovo at this moment, I must say that I would be strongly against it. We have to work only through a dialogue that will lead to normalization, but if normalization is just the recognition of the independence of Kosovo, then I do not know what we need to talk about next. It is obvious that this is not all, neither is Kosovo, nor is Kosovo's independence a complete thing. If that was the end of the matter, we would not have negotiated it today. On the Serbian side, we are open and ready to talk, to negotiate, but if the whole thing simply comes down to the independence of Kosovo and the question of why is Serbia working on the process of withdrawing of the recognition of Kosovo, well, Kosovo is working on the recognition process. These are therefore two opposing political positions. The goal of the negotiations is precisely to bring the opposing political positions closer, to establish normal cooperation, without blackmailing each other and without mutual pressure.

That is why it is important not to go back to the beginnings, because by doing things in the way you did when the problem arose, you cannot solve that problem. Peace in Kosovo, and when I say peace, I mean complete normalization - it will be the peace of the brave. The peace of brave politicians in Belgrade and the peace of brave politicians in Priština who will have the strength and who will have enough courage to tell their citizens the news that none of them wants to hear.

Holger Haibach

Thank you very much. You gave me a very interesting idea to ask a slightly more provocative question, maybe a question some people would laugh about to Mr Lazić. I would like to look at it from a different perspective. When I talk to young people here in Croatia, if you ask them where the best place is to celebrate they will always say – Belgrade! When I look at my favourite football team, which is Eintracht Frankfurt, Serbian and Croatian players are playing along without beating each other and achieving really great results - like giving us the first national cup in the 30 years' history of my team. And when we invite young people for our civic education programmes from Serbia and from Kosovo, they have no problems talking to each other and they can talk about problems. I know politics is much more complicated, it has to do with national pride, it has to do with heritage and with history. But the question for me would be, what do these young people know what we do not know?

Nikola Lazić

Again, we cannot look at things from the same angle. If we are talking about mutual cooperation of students, when we meet together in a certain place, then we have a common topic to talk about and we put politics aside. At the Faculty of Political Sciences, we constantly had meetings of students from the former Yugoslavian countries and we were always happy to celebrate that in Belgrade and we even had guests from Kosovo and Albania. Even when we have certain topics, we avoid those which touch upon our conflicts, but we find instead topics for conversation that concern mutual progress and opportunities for cooperation. When the topic of the boundaries of the national identity or history is raised, then it is already going in a negative direction and we put such topics aside. However, when we talk

about politics, we are talking from a different angle. In that case, it should be borne in mind that Kosovo is a part of the national identity of Serbia, and when we talk about it, then we cannot talk about topics that separate us. There is simply no place for such topics when we are in collaboration. And when it comes to politics, it is completely different. So I think that is my answer to that question, if we want to be brief.

Holger Haibach

Thank you very much. I am totally aware that politics is a completely different animal. I am just trying to make a case that there obviously is a way of bringing people together and perhaps that the building of mutual trust, which in the end might lead also to a fruitful political discussion, this is actually what we as a Foundation do. The fact that Norbert and I are cooperating so closely, although the political relations between Zagreb and Belgrade have been strange, shows that it is possible to get a dialogue under way. That brings us to the end of the conference, and I would like to ask my friend Gordan to give us his closing remarks and perhaps wrap up the whole discussion.

Gordan Akrap

Thank you, Holger, thank you all. I would just like to say a few things and comment it. Personally, I think that it is not so easy to compare these two things - the relations between Croatia and Serbia, between Croatians and Serbs on the one side and Serbia and Kosovo, that is Serbs and Albanians on the other side. Basically, these are two different things. As our colleague Nikola said, Kosovo is treated in Serbia as a part of their national and cultural identity, history and heritage, but the parts which were occupied during the Homeland war in Croatia were not treated like that. So it was much easier, the times were different

and we had different leaders at that time who were able to find some kind of agreements. These agreements later reintegrated the Croatian Danube river without fight, without bullets - peacefully. We still have problems, social problems and we are faced with challenges, because this is all a process. But, as I said numerous times - every peace, by the very fact that it is it faces a lot of challenges, it is better than any kind of war. Therefore, it is a little bit problematic and much harder for Serbia and for Kosovo to accept these kinds of organization of the peace agreements and the other things concerning finding a long-lasting solution for the relations between Kosovo and Priština. That is what I said at the beginning.

What I have heard most of the people say today was, let us do it step-by-step, let us try to avoid political connotations of the activities that might connect us and help us to make a safe and secure present and future. It is not so much for us, but for the future generations to come. I hope and I strongly support what my friend Dragišić said, we need power and heroes in politics who are going to say - yes we are going to do it, yes, we are going to run over the Rubicon river, we are going to do it for the favour of our people. And this has to be done on both sides, not on one side only.

Secondly, the possibilities and the power that the European Union has on its hands, as well as the instruments which it has on its disposal, gives the EU its rightful place as the main leader in the negotiation process. It is going to be a long process, it is going to be painful from time to time, because you will be faced with failures and feelings that you are failing. But it is a fact which you have to accept, and this is something that has to be done in future without stopping and with continuity.

I would like to say thank you to all of you who have been here with us today and I hope that next year we are going to continue with these series of topics. Not only with the regional perspectives, but also with topics that will be covered from various points of view. Holger.

Holger Haibach

Thank you very much Gordan for putting things into perspective and making clear the differences between the different sometimes tensioning relationships between various countries in the region. I think it has been made clear by those who are participating today that there is a will to find solutions. But as Gordan said, it will take some brave leaders and some brave decisions to finally come to those conclusions and to those solutions.

It is only now left to say thank you to all the participants. It was a great pleasure to have you all around the virtual table. Thank you very much for making yourself available and thank you for participating in the discussion. I wish you all a Merry Christmas, be it Catholic or Protestant or Orthodox, and also a Happy New Year. I believe the most important thing one can wish for everybody is that you and your families and your loved ones stay healthy. Thank you very much.