

Keynote speech for Session on Public Opinion
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Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear colleagues,

My thanks to the host authorities – our colleagues from the Assembly of North Macedonia and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe for the organization of this event – it provides us with the much-needed opportunity to discuss, exchange and further strengthen parliamentary involvement and impact on EU integration processes.

For The Western Balkans, a region with a rich history and vibrant cultures, the European vision, once a beacon of hope and progress, is losing its shine. We continue to witness a discouraging trend, particularly among the young people whose optimism, once fervently directed towards European Union accession, is waning.

It is very disheartening to read some of the public opinion trends of The Balkan Barometer 2023 such as growing distrust in political parties (75%) or the fact

that 71% of young people are considering leaving their home country; or lack of trust in equality before the law (69% say the law is not applied to everyone equally); a feeling of deep concern about the spread of fake news (65%); lack of satisfaction with the economic situation (51%) and the persistent problems of corruption (27%).

We are also witnessing a resurgence of ethno-nationalism, a force that history has shown us can have disastrous consequences. In a region still haunted by the specter of past violence, this development is profoundly worrying. It carries significant implications for the stability and prosperity of the Western Balkans, and indeed for the wider European community. It is not simply a cause for concern - it is a call to action for it threatens to unravel the progress achieved and undermines the very essence of unity and cooperation that the European project was built upon.

We must recognize that the disillusionment in the Western Balkans is not without reason. The prolonged accession process, bureaucratic hurdles, and wavering commitments from both sides have eroded faith in the promise of EU membership. Enlargement is supposed to anchor democracy and help entrench the rule of law in the EU. New member governments would implement reforms

and be rewarded by the Union. But the evidence that this is happening—or indeed that this has ever been the case, even at the peak of the EU’s influence in the 2000s—is scant.

Whilst in the context of several member States the EU speaks about democratic backsliding, in the Western Balkans, it is more appropriate to speak of democratic stagnation. Though the situation differs from country to country, in general, there are no major improvements or dramatic drops.

The most obvious explanation for the impasse is the EU’s own lack of commitment to the Western Balkans. The region is firmly on the union’s agenda but has never been a top item. Between the eurozone crisis in the early and mid-2010s, the crisis in Ukraine in 2014–2015, the refugee wave in 2015–2016, the coronavirus pandemic, and the more recent Russian aggression in Ukraine, there is always another priority that relegates Europe’s so-called inner courtyard further down on the union’s to-do list.

The region has been involved in European integration since the early 2000s. There have been numerous initiatives, formats, and institutional innovations, from the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe to the French presidency’s new

accession negotiations methodology adopted in 2020, and from the Stabilisation and Association Agreements to the Berlin Process to the annual EU–Western Balkan summits. Both the EU and Western Balkan elites have learned how to talk the EU talk, but deliverables are few and far between.

Surveys indicate that public support for EU membership varies significantly across the region, with Albania and Kosovo* usually scoring high and Serbia low. A poll by Ipsos in Serbia published in April 2022 found that 44 percent of participants were against Serbia joining the EU, and only 35 percent were in favor—the first time that negative views prevailed. However, elsewhere in the Balkans, support for joining the EU is solid. The problem is that those pro-EU majorities do not generate sufficient electoral momentum to propel to power reformist leaders—or at least force incumbents to implement laws and policies narrowing the gap with the union.

The EU is facing tough questions in the region, and there are no quick fixes. Faced with the war in Ukraine and the Russian challenge, the union needs to deliver to be able to consolidate its position and prevent disruption – it is time that it shows its commitment to the region and push for the EU integration of the Western Balkans. But we are all aware that in addition to the internal

regional challenges of the Western Balkans, a lot will also depend on the EU's own evolution. A continued democratic retrenchment would cement the Western Balkans' position on the outside of the Union.

So, what can be done to address this concerning situation? It is imperative that we recommit ourselves to the principles that underpin the European Union: peace, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. These are not just abstract ideals, but concrete foundations upon which prosperous societies are built.

Our response must be multifaceted. First and foremost, we must address the genuine grievances and frustrations of the people in the region. This means for the EU and the candidate countries to streamline accession processes, provide clearer pathways, and demonstrate unwavering support for the reforms necessary for EU integration. As parliamentarians, we have a crucial role to play to ensure we represent the voice of the people and ensure that the EU integration process reflects the will of the citizens of the Western Balkan countries. We also need to do our job and make sure we do not drag our feet in passing the laws and regulations that align a country's legal framework with EU standards and norms. This is a fundamental step towards integration.

We should do more and do better when it comes to initiating and holding parliamentary debates and discussions aimed at providing information about the EU integration to the public. This helps in building awareness and understanding among our citizens.

Furthermore, achieving consensus on EU integration issues often requires political parties to work together. We should put politics aside when it comes to EU integration and provide the much-needed forum for different political factions to find common ground and develop a unified approach.

As parliamentarians, we should get together more frequently for events like today's conference – we should not underestimate the important role of parliamentarians in fostering cooperation and dialogue between Western Balkan countries to resolve any regional issues and demonstrate stability to the EU.

And again, as in today's conference, we should continue to provide a platform for civil society, and media organizations to engage in the EU integration process and to promote inclusivity. We must engage with the youth. Their disillusionment is a clear signal that we need to reinvigorate the European

project and make it relevant to their lives. We must create opportunities for dialogue, understanding, and collaboration between young people from different communities, fostering a sense of shared identity and common purpose.

Furthermore, we must reinvigorate the narrative of a united Europe. We must remind ourselves and our citizens that the European Union is not just an economic alliance; it is just as much about shared values, about peace, and a testament to the power of cooperation over conflict.

It is also crucial that we demonstrate the tangible benefits of EU integration. It is important for us as parliamentarians to engage more actively with EU and encourage investments in projects that directly impact the lives of our citizens, creating a visible link between European values and improved living standards. This includes initiatives focused on education, infrastructure, and economic development.

Equally important is the need to further strengthen cooperation among the Western Balkan countries. The Balkan Barometer did not only deliver bad news – it also revealed good news such as the fact that 76% of people believe regional

cooperation is good for their economy and that 69% agree that what brings the Western Balkan citizens together is more important than what separates them. Tangible results such as the signing of the regional agreement for mutual recognition of professional qualifications and the opening of a campus of the College of Europe in Tirana, or the endorsement of Joint Declaration on the Wifi for Western Balkans Initiative and a Joint Declaration on the Establishment of a Convergence Observatory in the Western Balkans help to consolidate the internal regional market, boost economies, and bring Western Balkans closer to Europe. Eliminating roaming charges for calls and text messages for all mobile-phone users across the region is another positive example of further regional integration. We should talk more about such positive developments, adopt inclusive narratives that promote and celebrate unity, diversity and emphasize the shared interests that bind our citizens and communities together. By dismantling the divisive rhetoric and building bridges of understanding we can pave the way for a more harmonious and integrated future in the European Union.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues,

The challenges before us are formidable, but the stakes are too high for complacency. The Western Balkans deserve a future intertwined with Europe, free from the shackles of division and conflict. It is our collective duty to reignite the European spirit, to illuminate the path forward, and to stand united in the face of adversity.