

# POLICY PAPER

## Reconciliation in the Western Balkans: Overcoming the past together

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- **Two decades after the last armed conflict in the Western Balkans, the reconciliation process in the region is still in its embryonic phase. Reconciliation is considered both a determinant for the democratization process of these countries and a precondition for them to join the EU at a later stage. Moreover, a satisfactory degree of reconciliation is also seen as an essential “step which would make European integration a long-term success”.<sup>1</sup>**
- **Today, the political and social dynamics in the region are characterized by high youth unemployment, lack of trust in the governing elites and gloomy prospects of EU membership in the near future, which have affected citizens’ perceptions and level of confidence that the reconciliation process can overcome the present stalling stage. Moreover, the standstill with the enlargement process has allowed the local elites in power to raise the nationalistic rhetoric in their public speeches for short-term political gains, at the expense of the wider regional rapprochement process.**



The reconciliation process in the Western Balkans is a multidimensional and complex issue for several reasons, including the number of countries involved in such a circumscribed geographical area with different ethnicities and religions professed by the local societies. The existing bilateral disputes in the region are both internal within a country and inter-state. Sometimes, these disputes face also an external dimension reflected in the relations with third parties, like the case of Kosovo and Serbia and the general positioning of Albania. While countries like North Macedonia and Greece have managed to overcome the past dispute on the name issue through the Prespa Agreement and implementation of trust building measures, others are still in limbo, and with limited prospects for a viable solution in the foreseeable future.

In technical terms, reconciliation is considered a 'polysemic' concept and no consensus has been reached on a common definition. It is considered both a goal and a process, demanding strong leadership and momentum in order to be realised in a given context. As a goal, it seeks to attain the improvement of mutual relations between involved parties, and this evolves into a long and multi-faceted negotiation process which leads to the gradual (re)establishment of trust.<sup>2</sup> There is no magical model allowing for a swift and painless reconciliation process for local societies. Nevertheless, reconciliation has to be considered a key part of the solution for the Western Balkans because at the end of the day all countries in the region are interdependent on each other and seek a common future perspective in the wider European framework.

The establishment of the Berlin Process back in 2014 provided a new momentum for regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. In particular, it contributed to bringing back the attention to the role and importance of achieving reconciliation and inter-societal dialogue in the region. The

declaration of the first high level summit in Berlin mentioned clearly that the collective endeavours are expected to generate additional real progress in the region as well as achieve reconciliation within and between the local societies.<sup>3</sup> The existing disputes should be resolved through pragmatic means and the advancement of reconciliation should be considered a stepping stone for the achievement of sustainable economic development. Eventually, lagging reconciliation hinders growth<sup>4</sup> as this process is intrinsically linked with other policy areas within the regional cooperation framework, such as the connectivity agenda. Moreover, reconciliation serves also as a foundation for a long-lasting security and stability in the region looking towards an EU membership perspective.

In its conclusions of June 2019, the Council underlined once again the need to overcome the past legacies and foster reconciliation in the Western Balkans, on the basis of commonly shared values, such as tolerance, inclusiveness and mutual trust. Moreover, it highlighted the importance and contribution of civil society actors in this region-wide process, which should be further accompanied by stronger political determination.<sup>5</sup>

However, from a political cooperation perspective, the Western Balkan leaders are still not taking seriously the importance of initiating a reconciliation process in the region, and even less establishing it as a theme for discussion in their political agendas. So far, reconciliation is invoked mostly at a declaratory level by the local elites while the national political leaders still do not demonstrate enough political will or ownership of it. Although the space dedicated to this process seems limited, reconciliation cannot and should not be reduced to only several high level meetings among political leaders, nor should it be seen as an issue which can be achieved with only political elites engaged in it. This constitutes an endogenous process that demands for multi-actor participation,<sup>6</sup> with the civil society,

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<sup>1</sup> Ana Marjanovic Rudan (ed.), "Reconciliation through the Berlin Process: The role of RECOM", Policy Brief, November 2017, available at: <https://bit.ly/2Zh92vw>

<sup>2</sup> Valerie Rosoux, "Is reconciliation negotiable?", *International Negotiation*, Vol. 18, 2013, p. 487.

<sup>3</sup> Final Declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans, 28 August 2014, <https://bit.ly/2F3LIPw>

<sup>4</sup> Heiko Maas, The Western Balkans: No progress without reconciliation, 11 April 2019, available at: <https://bit.ly/2Wy5fbs>

<sup>5</sup> Council of the European Union, Council conclusions on Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process, ELARG 30 COWEB 86, 10446/19, Brussels, 18 June 2019, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Nathalie Duclos, "Incertaine réconciliation au Kosovo," *Raisons politiques*, Vol. 9, no. 2, 2003, pp. 141–159

business community and media as co-participants in building a new narrative, detached from old tensions and re-emerging xenophobic rhetoric.

In light of these issues, the present paper seeks to focus on the vital importance of reconciliation in the Western Balkans and the emergence of a wider societal consensus and broader understanding among different actors on furthering efforts to collectively speed up this process. Reflecting on the common values promoted by the European Union as well as building on the experience and lessons learned from the Visegrad countries, the final aim is to build a sustainable and comprehensive reconciliation process in the Western Balkans, as a stepping stone for enhanced socio-economic relations between the local societies.

## Reconciliation from the EU perspective

The process of reconciliation lies at the very roots of European integration, built on rapprochement between post-WWII France and Germany. The idea of uniting former enemies in the pursuit of shared interests and engaging them in constructive and pragmatic cooperation, embedded in the Schuman Declaration in 1950, laid the basis of the European Coal and Steel Community.

After the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, reconciliation once again became a crucial topic, this time between the West and East, previously divided by the Iron Curtain. Dealing with the past and overcoming the burden of historical wrong-doings represented an issue especially between newly reunited Germany and Central European countries – such as the Czech Republic and even more so Poland. In the 1990s, a number of initiatives were adopted and implemented aiming at the acknowledgement of past crimes and acceptance of responsibility, and declarations were signed and deeds were made proving willingness on both sides to draw a clear line under past issues and to move forward in a spirit of constructiveness, cooperation and good neighbourly relations (e.g. the Czech-

German Declaration of 1997). The success of the reconciliation process between the East and West of Europe was demonstrated by the close economic cooperation developed between Germany and these countries, and the support Germany provided to the Visegrad countries, in particular in their efforts to join the EU.

The reconciliatory nature of the EU is still present and widely acknowledged as one of the founding principles of the EU, with the Franco-German rapprochement example sometimes serving as an inspiring factor in the Union's approach towards promoting reconciliation in the Western Balkans.<sup>7</sup> After the eastern enlargement in 2004, several initiatives were launched aimed at the remembrance of the victims of totalitarian regimes in Europe', such as the Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism, the informal European Parliament group Platform of European Memory and Consciousness, etc., all of which helped various European countries come to terms with totalitarian legacies.

In relation to the Western Balkans, reconciliation, together with regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations, remain a key factor in the region's EU integration path. Unlike in the case of any other previous enlargements, in the frame of the Union's Stabilisation and Association Process, the Western Balkans face an additional conditionality on good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation, tied closely with an enhanced reconciliation process among the countries and societies of the region. Most recently, the necessity of successful reconciliation in the region in order to achieve its European future has been brought forward by the European Commission in its new Strategy for the Western Balkans titled "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans"<sup>8</sup>. To a certain extent the Strategy is a follow-up to the initiatives undertaken by the Civil Society Forum (CSF) within the Berlin Process framework where reconciliation has been stressed as an area where further progress is needed.

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<sup>7</sup> "Serbs and Albanians should do as Germans and French", B92, 10 May 2017, available at: <https://bit.ly/31pltaz>

<sup>8</sup> European Commission, "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans", COM(2018) 65 final, Strasbourg, 6 February 2018.

The Strategy addressed the importance of reconciliation in the region (and the lack of progress in this regard) in a comprehensive way and this appeal is present throughout the entire document. Reconciliation and good neighbourly relations appear also among the six flagship initiatives introduced in the Strategy – areas which are of a special interest to the EU and the Western Balkans where more engagement as well as financial support should be headed. The Commission calls for proactive and responsible approach by the leaders of the Western Balkan countries, as “further efforts towards reconciliation are crucial to firmly anchor peace and ensure lasting stability in the region.” The Strategy emphasises the necessity of regional ownership of the reconciliation initiatives and addresses the region’s leaders directly, as they are the ones responsible for the discourse and inspiring their societies in regard to their neighbours.

The Strategy addresses the following aspects of reconciliation which require larger focus: regional cooperation initiatives (mainly focused on youth – RYCO); progress in the process of transitional justice - fate of missing persons, refugees and IDPs (support to RECOM and similar initiatives); cultural exchange and protection of cultural heritage (e.g. the EU-WB Heritage Route which is already in place); education towards greater tolerance, European values and strengthening the cohesion of society; solution to border disputes and any other open bilateral issues before EU integration; and last but not least, constructive and responsible rhetoric by the leaders of the region and discourse they create.

However, the Strategy does not mention dialogue between historians and also religious leaders which should deal with the most divisive historical topics, as mutual ethnic prejudices and grievances are deeply rooted in the past. The dialogue should be as utilitarian and practical as possible resulting in the creation and dissemination of new regional history textbooks. Their crucial aim should be the change of negative national stereotypes deeply rooted in the past.

The initiatives should involve not only the states but also municipalities and business communities. All these efforts should be supported by the European Union and strive to place the history of the Balkans in the wider

European context. The Strategy does not acknowledge also that the region achieved certain substantial successes in building on social or/and political level close cooperation including cultivating of common heritage. In fact, they may even serve as a source of inspiration for the EU countries, including especially the Visegrad Group.

## Reconciliation and good neighborly relations: The Visegrad experience

The V4 countries aspire to play the role of an important source of inspiration for the reconciliation process in the Western Balkans, both when it comes to the reconciliation between themselves and with third countries. The Visegrad Group was created in order to enhance cooperation between three (1991-92) and then four countries (1993-present). The aim of the signatories was to overcome problems from the past and concentrate on common challenges, one of which was the integration into European and trans-Atlantic integration structures. By declaring positive and pro-integration agenda, the Visegrad Group distinguished itself from the (at that time) unstable regions of Eastern and South-eastern Europe (namely, the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, which were undergoing the process of painful disintegration).

Besides the intensification of regional cooperation, in particular the accession of the V4 countries to the EU was considered as another factor that would eliminate potential tensions between the countries and contribute to the reconciliation process. Though the impact of both has certainly been positive and the V4 can be described as a stable area, the potential for nationalist mobilization of some parts of the population has remained high in the region. Therefore, the developments in the V4 area have not always been free from bilateral tensions and uneasy periods even after 2004.

When it comes to the reconciliation between the V4 countries, the Slovak-Hungarian relationship can be perceived as the most complicated one. The statement is valid despite the fact that since 2010 (when the second Orbán Government came to power) the communication between the representatives of both countries has basically

been freed from hostile and nationalistic elements (which was, paradoxically, not true for the previous time periods when social democrats ruled in both countries). Nevertheless, the changes in the style of communication observed by many analysts cannot overshadow the fact that several disputed issues remain unresolved. The issue of the double citizenship can serve as a good example. Several attempts of some political leaders to initiate a formal reconciliation process (on the verbal level) had only limited impact on the real life.

Besides the existence of mixed Slovak-Hungarian inter-governmental commissions, in fact there exist no other formal instruments of cooperation. The involvement of both countries in the Visegrad Group has, nevertheless, decreased the importance of bilateral issues or disputes. The coordination of positions and joint projects – also on the EU level - are perceived as more important by the relevant stakeholders than quarrels over the past, at least for the moment. Joint projects supported also by the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), the only standing institution in V4, have also played a positive role. When taking into consideration the existence of a sizable Hungarian minority in Serbia, certain parallels between Slovak-Hungarian and Serbian-Hungarian relations could perhaps be made.

Regarding the reconciliation of the V4 countries with their non-V4 neighbours, relations with Germany in particular can be taken as a positive example. The existence of the reconciliation instruments in both Czech-German and Polish-German relations (especially the Czech-German Fund for Future, as well as Foundation for Polish-German cooperation) contributes to the reconciliation process and good neighbourly relations. Even the fact that the idea of the re-opening of negotiations on post-war reparations appears time to time in Polish political discourse does not influence negatively the status quo.

The ability of the V4 to serve as a positive inspiration, however, might be endangered by some negative developments in the region, including the rise of Islamophobia, widespread anti-Roma sentiments, or maintenance of negative attitudes towards “others”. The relations of some V4 countries with their non-V4

counterparts experienced deterioration particularly because of the clash of interpretations concerning the difficult past. The re-emergence of exclusive and confrontational politics of memory in the region, supported not only by extremist, but sometimes also mainstream politicians, resulted in re-emergence of “old” national stereotypes. These negative developments occurred primarily due to the fact that reconciliation was not sufficiently entrenched in the society through education. Many history textbooks cultivated the old nationalistic paradigm, which, combined with the passivity of the so-called pro-European elites in dealing with the difficult issues of the past, in many cases allowed nationalists to capture the historical narrative. In this particular case, the Western Balkan countries can learn a bitter lesson.

## Past, present, future: United in diversity

Reconciliation in the Western Balkans, a complex and multidimensional process involving wide scope of actors (inter alia the EU and its member states, among them Visegrad Four) is concentrated according to the EU around “overcoming the legacy of the past”. Certainly, the conciliatory declarations and actions of politicians concerning the present and cooperation of business communities focusing on the future represent integral and necessary elements of reconciliation but are not sufficient to achieve the main goal. The capacity to deal with historical grievances, nationalistic approaches to history and negative stereotypes rooted in the past must also be developed within the reconciliation process.

However, it seems that currently in the Western Balkans the present and future oriented approach predominates in the reconciliation process and the interest in perceptions of the past is lagging behind. This approach expresses itself in the persistence of negative historical national stereotypes in the public sphere including education. The stereotypes can be again manipulated by nationalists. The lack of balance between the three dimensions (past, present, future) may undermine the sustainability of the reconciliation process. In fact, the

recent negative developments in the Visegrad countries (the rise of xenophobia intertwined with nationalistic manipulation of the past in order to mobilize the electorate) provides the evidence confirming the assumption.

The EU enlargement intertwined with the reconciliation process, despite the fact that it involves six small countries, will have wider European or even global implications in the context of identity. History and culture constitute an important element of the European enlargement to the Western Balkans. Indeed, the EU in its new Strategy for the Western Balkans underlined that “the peoples of the EU and the region have a common heritage and history”.<sup>9</sup> It is worth recalling that the Western Balkans are mostly inhabited by internally diverse people of Orthodox Christian and Muslim background. Meanwhile, both religious communities constitute minorities in the EU. Three Western Balkan countries are inhabited mostly by people of Muslim background and they constitute a large part of the population in two states of the region. This means that as a consequence of the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU, countries with Muslim majorities will for the first-time ever become member states. Moreover, accession will increase the number of states with Orthodox majorities substantially from four to seven. In effect, the EU will become more “united in diversity”. Most probably, the accession of the Western Balkans will provoke discussion about the multicultural character of European identity including the place of Ottoman and Byzantine heritages in the history and culture of Europe.

On the other hand, the accession of the Western Balkan countries may be contested on a cultural basis by the Eurosceptic political forces defying the multicultural heritage of Europe and playing the Islamophobic card. Far-right parties, gaining support in recent years, deny the possibility of coexistence between people of various religious and ethnic backgrounds. The recent conflicts in the Western Balkans were struggles between nationalisms but many representatives of regional political elites often manipulated religious elements as well in order to mobilize

the nations and maintain power. The region’s nationalistic politicians often present ethnic conflicts as clashes of civilizations or religious wars. Their position is supported by the right-wing political forces within the EU. By default, the failure of the reconciliation process in the Western Balkans will be used as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy in the EU by politicians rejecting multiculturalism and especially playing up to Islamophobia.

From the point of view of the EU, good neighbourly and interethnic relations based on tolerance represent one of key pillars of the reconciliation in the Western Balkans. In its Strategy the EU demands unequivocally from the Western Balkan politicians to “avoid and condemn any statements or actions which would fuel inter-ethnic tension and actively counter nationalist narratives”.<sup>10</sup> In the opinion of the EU, even more important is the promotion of tolerance through education which must be given a higher priority than before. According to the Strategy, reconciliation should be also fostered through the enhancement of cooperation in the field of culture with and within the region.

## Actors in the Western Balkans reconciliation process

The actors involved in reconciliation in the Western Balkans in general and Kosovo and Serbia in particular are hostages of the political climate in the region which is produced by them. In this specific moment the constellation of actors, including their aspirations and their activities undertaken, are not favourable for the long-lasting peace and absence of threat perception, both key dimensions of reconciliation. The political climate cannot change if there is no political will from leaders with confronted interests. That is why the initiative of civil society from the Western Balkans to get their political leaders committed to invest in solving bilateral issues at the Vienna Western Balkan Summit in 2015 was fully justified. The Declaration on Bilateral Issues signed at the 2015 Vienna Summit by the ministers of

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<sup>9</sup> European Commission, “A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western

Balkans”, p.1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

foreign affairs from the Western Balkans, as well as the Joint Declaration on Regional Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations and Joint Declarations on War Crimes and Missing Persons signed at the 2018 Western Balkan Summit in London, created the regional framework for further providing political and institutional preconditions for reconciliation. Although these actions were of key importance, they approached only one dimension (political commitment) and were executed at one (regional) level of the reconciliation process. Therefore, other actors and dimensions have to be analysed because the process has become partly blocked on other levels and from other perspectives.

The reconciliation process is seen from different perspectives: of victims, perpetrators and by-standers as main target groups; state institutions (governments, parliaments, courts, security sector); civil society (NGOs, cultural and sport institutions, artists); economic actors (individual businesses, chambers of commerce); diaspora; regional political forums and organisations; regional civil society networks; international organisations (UN, Council of Europe, OSCE, EU); international judicial organizations (ICTY, ICJ) and international civil society networks. The process has different dimensions and actors (see table 1).

To support reconciliation and good neighbourly relations in the Western Balkans, domestic actors are crucial in taking action on legacy issues arising from the conflicts in the 1990s and on developing good relations with neighbouring countries. External actors could substantially contribute in this process, but if there is no political will from internal players, reconciliation aspirations cannot be fulfilled appropriately. Besides, in the case of Serbia and Kosovo the term “normalization” is used in official negotiations instead of “reconciliation” indicating launching of the process that has to create conditions of nonviolent, mutually acceptable coexistence where former enemies come to re-envision one another as fellow citizens<sup>11</sup> and/or people with equal rights.

As a part of the process of rebuilding political relationships, reconciliation is, in either case, vital for the process of democratization and appears to involve attitudinal, interpersonal, and institutional changes.

“Reconciliation debates often centre on the appropriateness of trials, truth commissions, lustration (purges), official apologies, memorials, reparations, amnesties, and other institutions and policies to address the past. Where violence was between countries, reconciliation normally refers to re-establishing social, political, and economic relations among erstwhile adversaries.”<sup>12</sup> Reconciliation in the Western Balkans has both dimensions – internal, between confronted ethnic groups, and inter-state, between the newly established states which emerged through wars. Thus, the reconciliation process is supposed to be more complex, long lasting and demanding specific coalitions of actors and sets of activities.

For example, there is no reconciliation issue between Serbia and Albania as the two states have had normal inter-state relations with over 60 inter-state agreements, memorandums and protocols agreed from the year 1926 onwards. Recently, the joint Serbian-Albanian Chamber of Commerce was established with the Secretariat in Tirana; national theatres achieved agreements on cooperation; universities established cooperation; tourism organizations promoted dynamic tourist exchanges, etc. Both countries played a constructive role in regional cooperation organizations and initiatives during the last two decades.<sup>13</sup>

However, there has been a strong case for reconciliation between the Serbian and Albanian peoples, as Kosovo, the former province of Serbia (Yugoslavia) with a majority Albanian population, unilaterally declared independence. This was not recognized by Serbia, but was recognized by more than half of the UN member states.<sup>14</sup> After the initial UN post-war involvement, Serbia and Kosovo started a normalization dialogue in Brussels with EU

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11 Kora Andrieu, “Reconciliation”, Introduction, 26 February 2013, DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780199743292-0148.

12 Ernesto Verdeja, “What is political reconciliation?”, Mobilizing ideas, 3 February 2014, available at: <https://bit.ly/31pmFuz>.

13 This was the state of affairs of their bilateral relations before the end of 2018 when problems appeared between Serbia and Kosovo.

14 Including 23 out of 28 EU member states.

mediation, and concluded the First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations, in Brussels, on 19 April 2013<sup>15</sup>, defining the obligations of both sides in order to make life of Kosovo citizens (including Serbian minority) safer and easier. However, the dialogue was stuck due to the lack of political will and the fact that both sides did not fulfil the obligations to the expected extent and in a timely fashion. An open crisis emerged after INTERPOL Assembly did not vote in favour of Kosovo membership<sup>16</sup> on 20 November 2018, due to the constellation of voting structure which reflected the Serbian position and lobbying efforts. It was coupled with a strong and rather successful Serbian campaign to persuade a number of Asian, African and Latin American countries to withdraw their previous recognition of Kosovo. The response from Kosovo was the introduction of 100% tariffs on Serbian goods (more than 500 million EUR of annual exports) which pushed trade into the 'grey zone' involving all neighbouring countries.

This has significantly hindered the already very sporadic and fragile reconciliation attempts initiated mainly due to the international pressure at the political level or by the efforts of NGOs and business community at the societal level as well as owing to support of different regional organizations and political forums.

There is no clear political will to acknowledge past events, to admit the victimhood of others and to own responsibility for their suffering, to accept verdicts placed upon war criminals of one's own nationality and agree on defining the extent of war crimes. Truth and reconciliation commissions have not been established, security services were not reformed, apologies were exceptionally rare, memorials were only for its own victims, prosecution offices hardly deliver results, history textbooks only increased divergences in the interpretation of historical events, the

narrative (nationalistic, aggressive and often vulgar) has not been substantially changed and victims have not been compensated morally and materially. In the previous decade, there were sporadic events that gave hope – visits to the locations of mass ethnically motivated killings by leaders of other ethnic groups (Croat and Serbian presidents Josipović and Tadić), declarations in national parliaments admitting the existence of massive war crimes (such as in Serbia concerning Srebrenica)<sup>17</sup>, apologies from high level political figures (Montenegro, Croatia, Serbia), reparations and compensations (Montenegro), return of property but without real support for returning it to normal, usable conditions.<sup>18</sup> Mostly, the burden of wars in former Yugoslavia was born mainly by citizens themselves. Some kind of "grand exchange" of their property, from which they were deprived on an ethnic basis, was silently tolerated at the state level. It was demonstrated by the weak performance of judicial institutions in dealing with war-related property issues.

Between Serbia and Albania great hopes were raised when Prime Ministers Vucic and Rama established a friendly dialogue during the Civil Society Forum, at the Western Balkan Summit in Vienna, in 2015,<sup>19</sup> and exchanged visits (in 2014 and 2015). This atmosphere lasted few years and generally contributed to the improvement of relations between two countries and two peoples as well. Governments and media played a crucial role in generating this positive climate. Business communities in the two countries, civil society and regional initiatives benefited considerably from this tide of positive energy. However, in the last half a year the relations have taken a downward trend and a lot of efforts would be needed to get them back on the right track.

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15 Full text of the "First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations" is available at: <https://bit.ly/1KkfHKU>.

16 "Kosovo fails for third time to win Interpol membership", Radio Free Europe, 20 November 2018, available at: <https://bit.ly/2I8LZgX>.

17 In March 2010, the Serbian Parliament adopted a Declaration on Srebrenica as a formal apology for the 1995 genocide committed by the Bosnian Serb Army and paramilitary

units of Serbia's Ministry of Internal Affairs. Declaration available at: <https://bit.ly/2X1U27d>.

18 Many villages with Serbian returnees in Croatia do not have water and electricity supply and appropriate road connections.

19 "Western Balkans Summit Vienna 2015 – Civil Society Forum", Erste Foundation, available at: <https://bit.ly/2KItktZ> & "Vucic, Rama in TV show on common future", European Western Balkans, 28 August 2015, available at: <https://bit.ly/2KOf6Yi>.

The public protests in most of the countries in the region which are focused on internal problems – lack of democracy and rule of law, captured state, corruption, inefficient parliament and judiciary, unfair elections conditions, media under pressure, unemployment and brain drain – reflect citizens' resistance to the authoritarian leaders keeping them as hostages of nationalistic policies.

In this climate, the great sportsmen from the region – Novak Đoković<sup>20</sup>, who declared himself as citizen of the region and Ćiro Blažević<sup>21</sup>, who as a Croat and member of the ruling HDZ party, supported Serbian candidate at the elections for European Parliament in Croatia – acted against the tide, showing the power of individual gesture at the public level and the right way how to deal with reconciliation in the Western Balkans.

## The role of youth in the reconciliation processes

Youth is identified as a distinctive social group of relevant actors in the process of reconciliation and peace building. While having a great potential to help build peace, young people can also be considered vulnerable and prone to becoming involved in violence, besides being manipulated by extremist sentiments if their place is not properly set in the emerging structures of post-conflict environments.

Within the framework of the Berlin Process, youth has already been recognized as a crucial actor in promoting peace, stability and cooperation among the societies of the region. In connection to reconciliation and dealing with the past, one of the main goals of the Action Plan for Youth Work and Youth Policy, which was adopted in 2016, was to ensure the operation of Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) which this paper identifies as a crucial actor in the reconciliation process in the Western Balkans region.<sup>22</sup> As it

was mentioned earlier, actors can be hostages of the political climate in the region which can be considered one of the biggest threats to reconciliation and regional youth cooperation. This can be true for the effective functioning of RYCO as well. In this regard, there are several challenges that RYCO faces. Besides the question of financial resources, one of the biggest risk factors are political in nature, possibly endangering the successful promotion of values that are essential in post-conflict societies to move forward on the path of reconciliation.

Firstly, a direct political influence posed by governments of the participating Western Balkan countries to promote their national interests at the expense of regional cooperation following the "business as usual" mentality is a very realistic hardship for RYCO as an institution itself and for its officials. Direct political influence can come in several forms: through governmental pressure put on the Governing Board members, through the controlling of funding, and through the marginalisation of youth representatives in general and in the Governing Board. The cancellation of the 9th RYCO Governing Board meeting in Pristina under the one-year-long chairmanship of Kosovo, which was cancelled due to a dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, demonstrates well the "political hostage" problem. Even though there is a visible governmental support of RYCO on the rhetorical level, a lack of mutual understanding and political will prevails and makes it difficult to move from the past. This precedent shows how the mixture of governmental pressure and the marginalisation of youth representatives can lead to the instrumentalization of independent regional bodies. Political commitment of governments must go beyond declaratory actions. Since RYCO is now fully operational, the cooperation in its framework will eventually require touching upon issues which are politically sensitive in nature. If governments fail to recognise this development and will be unwilling to deal with such obstacles, not only reconciliation but the entire

20 "Đoković: Sve nas iz regiona gledam manje-više isto", Hrvati su moji, *Vjesti*, Podgorica, 11 May 2019, available at: <https://bit.ly/2MHzGwl>.

21 In the interview he said that we are too small to exist if we are not united. "Intervju: Miroslav Ćiro Blažević", Radio Free Europe, 17 May 2019, available at: <https://bit.ly/2wN3EnV>.

22 "Europe-Western Balkans Youth Meeting: Connecting Youth Work and Youth Policy: Action Plan for Youth Work and Youth Policy", Ljubljana, 25 – 28 September 2016, available at: <https://bit.ly/31pZBf>

prospect of European integration could be in jeopardy. It is, however, a positive sign that the cancelled Governing Board meeting, which caused delays in the decision-making processes, has been eventually held on 6-7 June 2019 after reaching a compromise.

Secondly, another set of problems is connected to the challenge of recognition of both youth delegates in political decision-making processes in Western Balkans and of RYCO as an independent organisation. One of the main objectives of RYCO is to gain recognition in the region and in Europe which is an especially hard endeavour considering the differences in expectations of local and international stakeholders which might cause tensions among partners.<sup>23</sup> In this regard, receiving funding from donors other than the member states (for example specific projects have been funded by the European Commission, Norwegian Fund, United Nations Peace-building Fund or Federal Government of Germany) could present another challenge because while it increases RYCO's independence from the governments, it can decrease the fully regionally-owned character of RYCO by adding a more diverse set of interests to the already complex picture.

Thirdly, the blurry concept of reconciliation and how to implement related theory into practice is a source of a great headache also to the whole expert community. However, there is no doubt that if prejudice, stereotyping, the culture of separation and the legacy of absence of support for change continues to dominate attitudes of leaders and citizens, no meaningful progress can be achieved. Therefore, the significance of the role of youth, who have the potential to become the political, intellectual and spiritual leaders of future societies, in reconciliation could not be stressed enough. This leads to another challenge, namely the overburdening of RYCO staff. The need for tangible results also in the field of reconciliation, and the fact that that RYCO has been in the spotlight ever since its establishment, put a lot of performance pressure on the relatively small organisation.

RYCO has already made important steps to increase the demand for its activities on the political level by co-organising the "Strengthening Regional Parliamentary Cooperation in Support for RYCO and Parliaments' Engagement in the Berlin Process and Beyond" conference on 20-21 May 2019 in Berlin.<sup>24</sup> Further encouraging members of parliaments in Western Balkan countries to support RYCO and its functioning in this sensitive political environment could enhance the recognition of the work done by the organisation. Furthermore, apart from civil society leaders, members of the youth wings of political parties should also help to boost visibility and build a strong support for RYCO's cause against the "business as usual" mentality and ease the "political hostage" situation.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Reconciliation in the Western Balkans is a crucial process that should not be left aside for the better times to come. It is essential that this process becomes endogenous to the parties involved in bilateral disputes and receives the necessary political and societal support by the local stakeholders. The participation of the international actors in restoring peace, stability and initiating the reconciliation process in the region cannot and should not replace the local actors, whose direct participation is deemed fundamental for a long-lasting outcome.

However, the European Union remains an important actor in ensuring the enhancement of regional cooperation and reconciliation in the region, given countries' membership perspective. The experience of the V4 countries has shown that the intensification of such cooperation and the process of the accession to the EU had a positive impact on the elimination of tensions in bilateral relations. Nevertheless, neither regional cooperation nor EU accession per se can be treated as the panacea for all the problems related to different interpretations of the past.

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<sup>23</sup> Regional Youth Cooperation Office, "RYCO Strategic Plan 2019-2022", available at: <https://bit.ly/2wMIFCz>.

<sup>24</sup> Regional Youth Cooperation Office, "Western Balkans' Parliamentarians Crucial for Fostering Regional Cooperation", 23 May 2019, available at: <https://bit.ly/2F50uAt>.

In order to make the utmost use of the momentum created by the Berlin Process and the Commission's Strategy for the Western Balkans, as well as the initiatives undertaken so far by the civil society actors in the region, the reconciliation process needs to receive the deserved attention and to be enhanced through concrete initiatives, mechanisms, confidence-building measures as well as properly functioning regular channels of communication between different sets of actors. In this regard, the following recommendations are issued to all interested parties:

- The role of the European Commission is considered crucial for the monitoring and support of the reconciliation process in the region. In the wider European context, the role of the EU, and especially that of the Commission, should be further extended to support initiatives addressing transitional justice and seeking to overcome the legacy of recent conflicts in the region.
- The EU Strategy for the Western Balkans should broaden its scope to the establishment of a policy dialogue between historians and religious leaders, to deal properly with the present challenges such as the mutual ethnic prejudices or grievances rooted in the past. Moreover, the drafting of an action plan would be a useful tool for the timely realisation of all the objectives posed by the Strategy in the reconciliation area.
- The Western Balkan countries should invest more in their younger generations as future EU citizens and offer them a perspective for the future, not for the past. In particular, special attention needs to be paid to educational projects and development of school curricula that are in line with the idea of European integration.
- The reconciliation process should seek the direct involvement of the entire societal spectrum, including also the municipalities which are closer to the needs and realities of the citizens, as well as the private business community.
- The Western Balkan countries should commit to the realization of concrete initiatives that support reconciliation and good neighbourly relations which include a broad range of themes such as supporting transitional justice, solving cases of missing persons and increased cooperation in education, culture, youth and sport.
- Particular focus should be paid to the authoring of new textbooks for the younger generations, which present the point of view of neighbours and approximate as close as possible the positions of Western Balkan nations on divisive historical issues. The popularisation of history and heritage showing positive examples of coexistence, syncretism and tolerance and approaching the contested historical topics from "moderate" angles requires the increase of common regional initiatives regarding movies, TV series, music, festivals, games and exhibitions.
- RYCO and the Western Balkans Fund (WBF) should continue to be functional, independent and distant from any political instrumentalization by the region's governments.
- The primary space for project-based non-governmental cooperation among V4 and the Western Balkan societies is through the IVF and the WBF. In order to enhance cooperation among young people in V4 and Western Balkans in the area of exchange of experience with reconciliation, Visegrad countries should cooperate with RYCO and support specific reconciliatory projects, which do not overlap with projects implemented by the IVF and the WBF, as external donors.

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## Annex

**Table 1: Dimensions of reconciliation and main actors in the Western Balkans<sup>25</sup>**

Dimensions of reconciliation	Main actors per dimension
<b>Truth and Acknowledgement</b>	NGOs Political leaders and parliaments Government Media
<b>Apology and forgiveness</b>	NGOs Political leaders
<b>Justice and punishment</b>	ICTY Prosecution offices/courts for war crimes ICJ Media
<b>Education</b>	Government (Ministry of Education) NGOs Historians OSCE
<b>History telling and narrative</b>	Prosecution offices/courts for war crimes Religious and cultural leaders Political leaders Youth organisations NGOs Historians Media
<b>Reparations</b>	Government Courts NGOs
<b>Long-lasting peace and absence of threat perception</b>	Government Security sector (defence and police reforms) UN and EU missions Regional political forums and organisations Business networks and interactions Local communities

<sup>25</sup> The table adjusted version of Table 3 taken from B. Valíková, *Actors in the process of reconciliation and their impact on the post conflict society: A case study of Sierra Leone*, Bachelor Thesis, Brno, 2014, p. 26.