

## THE MARIBOR DECLARATION

### PROMOTING RECONCILIATION AND REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AS ESSENTIAL PRECONDITIONS FOR THE EFFECTIVE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION OF THE REGION

The viewpoints and recommendations included in this Declaration stem from our knowledge of the current circumstances in the Western Balkans (WB) and from the results and experiences we have gathered during the implementation of the project “Academic network supporting EU policies towards Western Balkans with emphasis on regional cooperation based on reconciliation – ANETREC” co-financed by the European Commission (EACEA). The ANETREC network included 55 professors and researchers from 8 academic partners (7 universities and 2 research centers) from WB region plus Croatia and Slovenia. The coordinator of the ANETREC network was the Institute for ethnic and regional studies - ISCOMET from Maribor, Slovenia (more about the project at <https://anetrec.eu>).

When formulating the recommendations outlined in this declaration, which pertain to the future development and implementation of policies and actions by the EU and other international organizations towards the Western Balkans, we have focused on three fundamental prerequisites. These prerequisites derived from the insights gained through the ANETREC project's implementation, namely:

**Firstly**, a consistent process of reconciliation within and between the Western Balkans and in its relations with neighbors presents a fertile ground for developing regional cooperation and is the most commendable prerequisite for ensuring the effective realization of the EU enlargement policy tenets and thus ensuring long-lasting peace, security, democracy, and sustainable economic development across the entire Western Balkans region.

**Secondly**, the academia within the Western Balkans and neighbouring countries could play a key role in shaping and implementing projects and initiatives that contribute significantly to the reconciliation process and, consequently, facilitate specific regional

cooperation efforts. To illustrate this, we underscore the academia's influence in designing education and research programs, drafting appropriate theoretical frameworks, and devising practical solutions for policy makers. Additionally, academia can play a vital role in disseminating information to the broader public.

**Thirdly**, educating the younger generations on the principles underlying a culture centred on peace and reconciliation, along with their gradual involvement as active participants in fostering these values within their societies, constitutes a model of paramount significance. This model serves as a means of cultivating a skilled and capable pool of individuals who can drive and uphold the processes of reconciliation and regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, it encompasses their interactions with neighbouring nations within the broader context of EU integration processes. As for the younger generations, the EU should also consider adequate measures for avoiding the stimulation by Member States of the brain drain from the Western Balkans, thus producing the shortage of educated and skilled labour force in the region needed for the sustainable development of these societies and for the implementation of the reforms required by the EU.

The Western Balkan region remains burdened by unsolved issues and legacies stemming from the conflicts of the 1990s, including matters such as war crimes, missing persons, and widespread hate speech. Additionally, the region has grappled with ongoing conflicts rooted in political, ethnic, or religious differences. Over time, these issues have contributed to the emergence of a polarized environment that hampers the region's future and obstructs the realization of EU integration policies.

It is worth noting that external factors could not impose reconciliation from abroad; it necessitates the proactive involvement of national governmental, regional and local authorities and non-governmental entities in initiating various reconciliation actions and processes.

Given these distinctive circumstances, it has become apparent that there has been limited initiative for reconciliation within the Western Balkans and in its relations with neighbouring nations, including efforts by civil society organizations. Therefore, it is commendable that the EU and other international stakeholders committed to the region's stability support the initiation and development of specific actions and programs pertaining to reconciliation. Academia, student organizations, civil-society

organisations and institutions, and governmental bodies, regional and local institutions alike should implement these initiatives.

In our pursuit of contributing to these objectives, we are putting forth the following proposals and recommendations:

**1. RECONCILIATION PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES.** The negotiations in accordance with *acquis communautaire* and other activities concerning legal and economic reforms, the rule of law, regional economic cooperation and infrastructure, the realisation of the Economic and investment plan, the endeavours to eliminate corruption and so on are, of course, of paramount importance in the process of the European integration of WB. We warmly welcome also the announcement of the European Commissioner for neighbourhood and enlargement Mr. Olivér Várhelyi in his address to the participants of the conference that the EU will in autumn 2023 adopt the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans together with annual enlargement package.

However, past experiences have shown that the successful reconciliation processes are the prerequisite for the implementation of these endeavours and thus for ensuring lasting peace and stability of the future members of the EU and the future European region as a whole.

Hereinafter, we are introducing some proposals for actions and activities, that the EU could consider as commendable for its support:

**1.1. Reconciliation concerning the consequences of the wars of the Nineties.** The EU should therefore support with adequate measures the judicial, legal, political, governmental and non-governmental actions adopted by national institutions, aimed at initiating further proceedings of perpetrators of war crimes, avoiding the treating of the convicted persons as war heroes and their involvement in public activities, enhancing the solution of missing persons issues and considering with consistent approaches the societal consequences of the conflicts.

**1.2. Reconciliation promoting the respect of otherness.** The EU should promote mutual knowledge of nations and national minorities from the Western Balkans by supporting the exchange of information on cultural events and everyday life's achievements and challenges of people in this European region. This could be achieved *inter alia* by different means including literature, news outlets, movies, popular culture content, etc. This is to our mind the most efficient way to guarantee

mutual understanding and respect, foster dialogue and fight against stereotypes or false narrative which are very often at the roots of missed reconciliation.

## **2. HIGH EDUCATION TEACHING AND RESEARCH PROGRAMS.**

Education in its entirety, and higher education in particular, stand as integral and foundational elements of the reconciliation process. Beyond the existing programs, the EU should actively encourage and endorse new innovative higher education and research initiatives. These endeavours should focus on cultivating awareness and knowledge among younger generations on the paramount significance of reconciliation as a pivotal factor in establishing the conditions for their improved and peaceful lives, founded on the principles of European integration in their respective countries.

**2.1. Joint higher education and research programs.** The EU should utilize its existing or innovative funding opportunities to initiate and champion various forms of education and research programs proposed by academic and research institutions in the Western Balkans. These programs should be designed with the specific goal of heightening the awareness and practical understanding of the younger generations concerning reconciliation processes. It is crucial to draw from past experiences in this regard. These initiatives should also encompass provisions for informal education, catering not only to the youth but also extending to adults.

**2.2. Promoting peace studies' programmes.** The programmes should go beyond the classic peace studies programmes with focusing on gaining knowledge and skills of relevant target groups on how to resolve conflicts and on how to ensure peace, security, stability, rule of law and sustainable democratic development after the conflict resolution. The realisation of these programmes would foresee the exchange of professors and students teaching or being enrolled in these studies.

## **3. REGIONAL COOPERATION ENHANCING HUMAN RELATIONS.**

Over the past few decades, the EU has made significant strides in developing and supporting regional cooperation initiatives in the Western Balkans, as evidenced by successful endeavours like the Regional Cooperation Council and the Berlin Process, particularly in the realms of the economy, infrastructure, and information technology. Given the current political and security circumstances and recognizing the imperative for effective reconciliation, we propose that the EU takes the initiative to further promote and support regional cooperation in areas such as human relations, culture,

sports, and similar activities. These dimensions of cooperation can play a crucial role in fostering understanding, trust, and social cohesion among the communities and nations of the Western Balkans, ultimately contributing to sustainable peace and progress in the region:

**3.1. Exchange of academics.** The European Commission (EC) should allocate additional resources and continue to support projects that facilitate the organization of exchanges, capacity-building initiatives, intercultural training, and other forms of cooperation for university educators, researchers, librarians, and staff in the Western Balkans. This strategic approach would ensure the growth of regional networks and relationships, which would significantly contribute to the shared development of programs, the exchange of knowledge and experiences, and ultimately, the promotion of mutual understanding. These efforts are instrumental in fostering peace, stability, and democratic development in the Western Balkan, thereby contributing to the overall well-being of the European region as a whole.

**3.2. Exchange of students and regional scholarships.** The EC should take the initiative to establish and support various modes of student exchange programs in the Western Balkans. These programs could encompass activities such as enrolling in suitable academic programs, participating in study visits, conducting thesis research, engaging in research activities, and similar endeavours. To facilitate these opportunities, the EC should consider providing scholarships and devising specific methods for student exchanges. In pursuit of this objective, it would be highly commendable for the EC to establish a regional exchange program dedicated to fostering and supporting diverse actions in this regard. Such a program would not only promote educational and cultural exchange but also contribute to the overall development and integration of the Western Balkan region.

**3.3. Supporting organisation of summer schools.** The common Summer Schools will be an opportunity for students to exchange knowledge on the agreed topics and to establish personal contacts as well.

**3.4. Supporting students' exchange.** During each exchange period (up to 4 weeks each) involved students will acquire new knowledge and experiences and establish contacts for cooperation in the future.

**3.5. Supporting cooperation between members of youth organizations and institutions.** The EU should take the lead in initiating and supporting diverse forms of cooperation, as well as facilitating institutional and individual contacts among members of youth organizations operating within the Western Balkans region. By actively promoting collaboration among youth organizations, the EU can foster cross-border connections, encourage cultural exchange, and empower young leaders to work collectively towards shared goals. These initiatives are essential for building bridges, promoting understanding, and cultivating a sense of unity and responsibility among the youth of the Western Balkans, which in turn contributes to regional stability and progress.

**3.6. Supporting cultural cooperation.** Drawing from successful experiences in other contexts, it is evident that culture serves as a potent asset for fostering mutual understanding, knowledge sharing, and the consolidation of reconciliation within fragile post-conflict societies. Therefore, we consider it imperative that the EU enhances its support for the organization of cultural events and initiatives aimed at achieving these goals. This could encompass activities such as art exhibitions, music and film festivals, and performances rooted in popular culture, among others.

#### **4. REGIONAL RECONCILIATION AWARD.**

The EU should establish a regional reconciliation award to recognize and honour institutions and individuals who actively contribute to reconciliation projects and effectively implement them in practice.

#### **5. EU REFERENCE CENTRE.**

We propose that the EU considers to establish an EU reference centre for Western Balkans issues, which would offer the EU structure informational support in dealing with the Western Balkans issues and would serve as an educational, research and meeting centre for those dealing with the challenges of this region.

Maribor, Slovenia, 12 September 2023