

European future of the Western Balkans has no alternative

The territory of the Western Balkans has no alternative future, but one day to become part of the large European family. The European Union cannot be complete without the Western Balkans, as assessed on the closing panel of the Economic Conference - Montenegro 2021, during which high representatives of the governments of the Central European Initiative countries were discussing the post-pandemic future of Europe.

The panel with the Prime Ministers of Montenegro and Croatia, and the heads of delegations of Albania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Northern Macedonia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Serbia, was moderated by Mr. **Goran Svilanović**, former Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council and a diplomat.

Reviewing the activities of the Government of Montenegro in the fight against the consequences of the pandemic on health and the economy, Prime Minister prof. dr. **Zdravko Krivokapić** expressed his satisfaction with the achieved results.

"I claim this Government will be the most successful one, most competent, equipped with the greatest knowledge and the largest number of solutions in respect to the context in which it found itself, all of which the history will prove", says the Prime Minister.

When it comes to the European integrations of Montenegro, Krivokapić pointed out that in that process we cannot talk about any security, but rather about expectations "which sometimes we do not know how to recognize or articulate in the right manner".

He emphasized that we should take a look at what we have done so far to contribute to our European path, and pointed out the need to strengthen the capacities, primarily the administrative ones, and create high-quality projects in order to attract finances from the EU funds.

Speaking about the activities aimed at recovery and development of the economy, the Prime Minister especially emphasized the „Europe Now“ program, which will contribute to the reduction of inequality, as it is especially pronounced in the north of the country, by increasing the minimum and average wages and introducing other measures.

Pointing out the importance of developing cooperation in the region and beyond, the Prime Minister said that the support of partners wasn't missing in these challenging times, emphasizing the support provided in this part by partners, embassies and the EU member states.

In the end, the Prime Minister expressed a special gratitude to all participants, and especially to Prime Minister Plenković, whom he met for the first time and who is optimistic and convinced that the Western Balkans will one day be part of the European Union.

The Prime Minister of Croatia, Andrej Plenković, expressed his gratitude to the Prime Minister for hospitality and conveyed the EU's message that this area has no alternative but to be part of the great European family. „The new methodology of negotiations for EU accession must be such to pave the path of the Western Balkans forward, rather than making it more difficult", he stressed out.

He reminded that Montenegro opened the last negotiating chapter during the Croatian presidency of the Union, and noted that Chapters 23 and 24 are key to the successful completion of this process. According to him, Croatia believes that all regional initiatives such as CEFTA, EFTA and newer concepts of cooperation represent variations of a kind of preparation for EU membership, which is very important for "understanding the depth of economic obligations arising from EU membership, which are not visible while you are a candidate and negotiate". Giving the example of Croatia, he said that after the country joined the Union, they encountered all that is accompanying the economic governance of the EU, which created numerous challenges.

"Croatia will always and exclusively advocate for the individual evaluation of the achievements of each country [on the European path]", said Plenković.

In the end, Plenković expressed his admiration for the countries which have been in the process of European integration for a long time, where there is great interest and public support.

Vice President of the Government of North Macedonia in charge of economic issues, Mr. **Fatmir Bytyqi** assessed that there is a great citizens' support to the European integrations, which exceeds 80 percent, and that retaining this level in such a long period of accession is challenging. He also referred to the impact of the pandemic crisis on the European aspirations of the countries in the region, especially in the part referring to the challenges that COVID crisis has posed in terms of solidarity, sharing, togetherness and equal opportunities.

"Unfortunately, now in the post-Covid period we see that many countries are increasingly focusing on themselves. Instead, we need to focus on Europe. In that process, I believe in the importance of regional cooperation contributing to competitiveness, and it will prepare us to become inclusive economies", he said.

Bytyqi especially emphasized Croatia's experience in the integration process, on the examples of which other countries in the region can learn when it comes to their aspirations towards Europe.

According to him, all negative trends such as migration and brain drain indicate that all countries in the Western Balkans must work together to raise business competitiveness. Speaking about the initiatives which bring the region closer, he said that they will contribute to the added value of our countries.

Aleš Hmelaš, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, pointed out that he admires the goals, commitment and determination of the Government of Montenegro on the European path, with special reference to the "Europe Now" program. He shared the experience of the Czech Republic from the time when its membership was confirmed in 2004, and a large inflow of investments began.

- It was a time of unprecedented convergence, which convinced us that we would reach the level of Austria in five or six years. However, it took us several years to learn how to be functional within the EU. The adjustments as a result of joining the EU has helped us become part of the EU economy, he concluded.

Vladimir Marić, Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, said that it is very important that the pandemic encouraged the development of science in which his country invests a lot, as well as of the four freedoms which the EU is based on. According to him, the Open Balkans initiative does not annul individual efforts towards the EU, instead it tends to speed up the whole process. We want to remove barriers in order for people to have the opportunity to find a job in Serbia, as well as in Albania and Northern Macedonia – said.

He expressed great expectations from the upcoming intergovernmental conference with the EU, since this country has not opened new chapters in the negotiation process for two years now. He assessed Chapters 23 and 24 as especially important and reminded that Serbia is determined to implement the necessary constitutional reforms.

Vladimir Cuc, the second secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Moldova, said that this country shares the challenges of the Western Balkans region regarding the pandemic crisis.

- The increasing inflation in the region causes growing concerns, because when you have low incomes, it additionally "eats" them - he said.

He emphasized good cooperation with the eastern partners, the EU and the WHO, and expressed the country's commitment to increase the vaccination rate and fight the energy crisis in the first place.

- We want to attract investors, which is impossible without good connections. The position of our region should be utilized, which requires digital transformation, a green agenda and innovations - he concluded.

The Albanian Ambassador **Vidi Kurteshi** estimated that the previous year was one of the most difficult ones for his country, but that its economy is successfully recovering in 2021. He thanked for the EU support, and pointed out that during the crisis the Western Balkans showed pragmatism in cooperation by facilitating trade, investments and ensuring supply efficiency.

- In the Region, it is necessary to facilitate the movement of goods, services and capital. We have a clear path to that direction thanks to both the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans initiative that show our maturity and readiness to take the future into our own hands - says Kurteshi.

Hungarian Ambassador **Jozsef Negyesi** outlined that Hungary has no open political or economic issues with the countries of the region. According to him, this country has provided support to numerous countries, including Montenegro, in vaccines and medical devices.

- The issue of migration is very important for all of us and it must be resolved jointly in cooperation with the Western Balkans and the EU - he emphasized.

The Ambassador of Poland, **Artur Dmochowski**, assessed that his country wants a strong European Union with strong members the institutions of which act in accordance with the laws of subsidiarity and equality. According to him, the industrial base should be strengthened and the potentials of the digital market should be utilized.

- We actively advocate for the inclusion of the Western Balkan countries at the conference on the future of Europe and continue to fund projects, scholarships for your students, and support the processes of decarbonisation and green transition - said Dmochowski.

Romanian Ambassador **Matei Viorel Ardeleanu** believes that the crisis, like all other, brings certain opportunities which should be utilized.

- The brain drain also affected Romania. There is no clear recipe for resolving this issue, but we have taken certain measures. A steady increase in wages, which are tripled in the health sector, has proven to be successful, while the IT sector is exempt from payroll taxes and it currently employs about 150,000 people, contributing to GDP with six percent, which is at the level of agriculture that employs two million people - concluded Ardeleanu.

The Slovak Ambassador **Boris Gedel** expressed his fear that the pandemic will continue, adding that there is again a lockdown in Slovakia and now they are focusing more on people's health.

- During the pandemic, Slovakia donated one million euros to the Western Balkans and 2.5 million to the Eastern Partnership countries. Few things in the world are certain, but what we can say is that Slovakia will continue supporting the Western Balkans on its path to the EU. This story is not over until your region becomes the part of the EU - he said.

Gregor Presker, Ambassador of Slovenia, pointed out that Slovenia is doing everything in its power to bring the region as close as possible to the EU, but also the EU to this region.

- During its presidency of the Union, Slovenia focused on the Western Balkans and Europe's resilience to various threats such as covid, climate change, migration, changes in food and energy supply chains. Post-covid recovery is asymmetric and it is necessary to focus more on private investments. According to him, Slovenia attaches importance to digital transformation, by which it takes advantage of digital markets and services.

Vassil Durev, Deputy Ambassador of Bulgaria, believes that it is necessary to find a balance between health and economic factors, and that the challenges of the pandemic will make us more prepared for future crises. The crisis has highlighted the importance of a multilateral response versus an individual approach, according to a letter from Bulgarian Prime Minister Stefan Janev read by the Ambassador. During its presidency, Bulgaria set priorities to improve and strengthen the opportunities provided by regional co-operation and European funds and initiatives.