

Consolidating the European idea in the Western Balkans

Position paper by the SPD Parliamentary Party Group

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After the European Union offered all the Western Balkan countries prospects of joining the European Union in Thessaloniki in 2003, individual countries made tremendous strides towards accession to the EU. This process has lost momentum over the last few years. Clear prospects of accession to the EU are dissipating, while the willingness of political elites to carry out reforms in individual countries has dwindled. At the same time, the Western Balkan countries have been hit hard by the international financial crisis.

The Western Balkans continue to face major challenges in 2015:

- These societies are still marked by corruption, nepotism and clientelism. This destroys trust and confidence in the political sphere while casting doubt on the reliability of the public administration and crippling entrepreneurial initiative.
- Issues involving relations between states remain unresolved. This impedes good neighbourly relations.
- We continue to be confronted with powerless parliaments, non-transparent political decision-making, a judiciary that is dependent on the political realm and an absence of freedom of the press. These deficits in the political system rob people of the opportunities offered by a properly functioning democracy.
- The economic situation continues to be precarious. The successor states of Yugoslavia have not been able to even return to the pre-war levels of economic activity in the late 1980s. It is especially young people who are suffering here, facing rampant unemployment. Many of them are leaving their country, many of them well trained.

These unsurmounted challenges are threatening the stability of the region. Social peace is at risk. Ethnic conflicts could also reignite.

People in the Western Balkans are losing faith in their European future: too many are being enticed to join up with international terrorism. Others are in thrall to authoritarian political rulers who categorically reject the Western model of democratic society.

At the same time, China, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have been increasing their commitment in the Western Balkans, thereby filling in a void left by the European Union.

In this state of affairs, the Western Balkans has become a flashpoint in current movements of refugees. On the one hand, many refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq are passing through the Western Balkans, while on the other many people from the Western Balkan states with little in the way of future prospects are also seeking asylum in Germany – most of them with no chance of

succeeding. If people in the Western Balkans had an economic future, there would be less of a strain on our asylum system today. Europe failed during the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, unsuccessful as it was in preventing the bloody wars of the 1990s. Now we are receiving the payback for failing to promote and call for European integration and the economic development of the Western Balkans decisively enough in the ensuing years. The European Union for this reason needs to devote special attention to the Western Balkans now.

A greater commitment could help create more stability in the direct vicinity of the European Union. Many people in the region place their hopes in Germany. Germany can leverage its influence in the European Union and internationally to move developments in a positive direction in the Western Balkans.

That is why we welcome the Western Balkans initiative launched by the Federal German Government at the Berlin Conference in August 2014. The Federal Government was successful in setting a process in motion that picked up momentum at the follow-up conference held in Vienna this summer. This process offers the opportunity to move forward the process of rapprochement between the Western Balkan states and make substantial progress on the road to Europe, thereby stabilising the region. That is why the SPD Parliamentary Party Group calls upon the Federal Government to redouble its efforts in pursuit of the following aims and objectives:

1. Lend new momentum to the process of accession to the EU for the Western Balkan states.

- **Intensify negotiations over accession to the EU.** Without weakening existing conditions, we should ease the opening of individual negotiation chapters. Negotiations on chapters 23 and 24 on a state governed by rule of law as well as chapter 32 on financial controls should be commenced as quickly as possible after the request for accession is filed. The same applies in the case of Serbia to chapter 35 regarding relations with Kosovo.
- **Reinvigorate the process of accession to the EU with the individual countries of the region.** We need to send out clear political signals to this end. This can be done with those states that are already conducting negotiations on accession to the EU by opening key negotiation chapters. With regard to Kosovo, the stabilisation and association agreement should enter into force as quickly as possible and visa requirements dropped in the near future.
- **Support accession candidates that face particularly difficult barriers in the search for pragmatic solutions.** With regard to Macedonia, this relates to the name dispute with Greece and for Serbia relations with Kosovo. The Dayton Constitution is paralysing further development in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Kosovo still lacks recognition by five EU member states.
- **Support regional political cooperation.** We expect governments and parliaments in the region to work to strengthen relations within the region. Good, constructive relations between Serbia and Albania play a key role in the search for solutions for the southern

Western Balkans. We want to strengthen states' own possibilities for reaching an understanding with one another and finding solutions to problems.

- **Support the forces of reform.** We should look for possibilities to support reform-oriented forces in the Western Balkan states. This could among other things be done in the guise of experienced teams of consultants offering help and support in specific situations.
- **Include our partners in the European Union.** Initiatives by individual EU members such as the "Berlin Process" and the Steinmeier-Hammond Plan, prioritising economic and social improvements for Bosnia and Herzegovina, are offering an important impetus in efforts to move the Western Balkans nearer to the EU. To amplify this impact, the European Union as a whole needs to be involved in the continued process.

2. Improve economic development.

- **Fight corruption.** We would expressly like to see work by national agencies combatting corruption strengthened and propose an intensification of cooperation with the European agency OLAF. Progress in the fight against corruption and organised crime needs to be registered even before the formal commencement of negotiations over accession.
- **Adopt specific measures to expand and improve infrastructure.** The Western Balkan states should be better linked to each other as well as with the European Union. This goes for road, rail and air traffic, inland shipping and the energy supply. It is the joint task of the European Union and the Western Balkan states to expand the pan-European traffic corridor in particular. Individual priority projects have been identified in the "Berlin Process". Suitable financing models must be developed jointly with the European Union, international financial institutes and bilateral donors.
- **Promote investment.** To facilitate investment by European enterprises, the individual states have to create reliable conditions for investment. We should contribute to this ourselves by supporting the expansion of foreign chambers of commerce in the Western Balkans. By the same token, access to loan capital must be eased for small and medium-scale enterprises at the local level. This would be an area in which the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau could step up its activities.
- **Foster regional economic cooperation.** The Western Balkans consists of small market economies for which greater cooperation is of existential importance. For this reason, the Regional Cooperation Council and CEFTA have to be reinforced. The Western Balkan countries must be called upon to engage in greater cooperation within this framework.
- **Encourage innovation.** Stronger regional cooperation in the field of education and science creates the foundations for more innovation. We should for this reason propose a science accord between the Western Balkan states as well as with the European Union.
- **Economic development should serve the needs of the people.** We should also promote regional cooperation more at the level of employees with the aim of strengthening the social partnership. Existing structures characterised by tiny and small business units

and specific traditions should be afforded more consideration in ideas for an expansion of the regional economy than in the past. In spite of planned infrastructure projects, EU budget resources should continue to be made available for projects promoting social cohesion and the development of local community infrastructure.

- **Establish modern vocational training systems.** Modern economies thrive on the qualifications of their skilled labour. It is for this reason that the establishment of a vocational training system should be pushed forward to open young people better prospects in their countries. The German dual training model can serve as a model here. Governments need to be supported in their efforts to establish vocational training at secondary schools and companies. The EU is also called upon to expand its initiative against youth unemployment in this region. At the same time as scholarships are being offered for students, non-university students should also be given the opportunity to acquire a good vocational education within the EU.
- **The European Union should remain the most important trading partner of the Western Balkans.** For several years now Turkey, Russia and China have been expanding their economic activities in the Western Balkans. The European Union, on the other hand, is losing its attractiveness. It is in our own economic interest to strengthen economic ties with the Western Balkan states.

3. Strengthen democracy and civil society.

- **Demand democratic reform.** Intact political parties in government as well as the opposition are key elements of a democratic society. Our political parties are called upon to demand improvements in internal party democracy in talks with representatives of their counterpart parties. On top of this, we should call for a strengthening of parliaments.
- **Promote the forces of civil society.** Many young people have become frustrated, turning their backs on the political sphere. Nevertheless, they still want to do something for their society. They are performing good work in non-governmental organisations and civil society groups. They are working for democratisation, combatting of corruption, political education, equality between women and men as well as sexual and ethnic minorities. We should first of all work together with them, in this manner stimulating political elites to address their concerns in a constructive manner. Secondly, we should encourage them to get involved in political parties in order to change underlying societal conditions in this manner.
- **Fight nationalism.** The surge in nationalism poses a problem throughout Europe. It is finding especially fertile soil in the Western Balkans as a result of the wars of secession in the past. We first of all need a European strategy for combatting nationalism. Secondly, we can confront nationalism in the Western Balkans by supporting an independent, critical media landscape and analysis of history.
- **Analyse and reassess history.** We must call upon the successor states of Yugoslavia to analyse and reassess their common histories and print this in schoolbooks. We should also support efforts to clear up political crimes. We can actively support the lustration that is

beginning at present thanks to our experience with the analysis and reassessment of the role of the East German Ministry for State Security.

- **Foster cultural cooperation.** Culture links people and nations together while strengthening the European idea. City and school twinning partnerships offer a useful framework for cultural cooperation. We should propose an agreement on the establishment of city twinning between countries in the Western Balkans.
- **Promote the establishment of a “Regional Youth Cooperation Office”.** A regional youth cooperation office based on the Franco-German and German-Polish models can help carry the European idea into the Western Balkans and rebuild mutual trust and confidence in the region. In the wake of the multilateral decision adopted at the Western Balkan Conference in Vienna, we should support the Western Balkan states in quickly specifying the structures, financing and design of exchange programmes.