
Exchanging Knowledge and Experience on European Integration

AcadEU Conference in Ljubljana

Aimed at providing a forum for academia, policy-makers, researchers, and civil society activists to discuss prospects for EU and regional integration of the post-Yugoslav space, the **AcadEU Conference** took place on November 23, 2013 at the **Faculty for Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana- Slovenia**. The one-day venue offered a rich program with open roundtables and working panels during and beyond which, 45 prominent scholars were exchanging ideas on how to enhance EU integration of the Western Balkans reflecting on the positive practices by Slovenia and Croatia alongside the promotion of strengthened regional cooperation among Yugoslav successor states.

Chaired by the project manager and coordinator- prof. **Zlatko Sabic**, AcadEU was inaugurated with the speeches of the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences- **Prof. Bojko Bucar**, the Minister of Education, Science, and Sport of Slovenia- **Dr. Jernej Pikalo**, the Deputy Head of the European Commission Representation in Slovenia- **Ms. Ulla Hudina**, and the Keynote address by the Member of the European Parliament- **Mr. Ivo Vajgl**.

Dean Bucar welcomed the participants and stressed the importance of academia in shaping and promoting future cooperation and integration of the region. Minister Pikalo introduced the fact that, on average, 5-7% of the people get involved in politics and leadership of countries, 30% are followers, whereas the remaining percentage of citizens that constitute almost two-thirds of the population are completely passive and indifferent to political matters i.e. matters that concern their wellbeing and future. Minister Pikalo concluded his remarks with calling upon the need of an increase of civil participation to at least two-thirds reminding, meanwhile, that “the European Union is our common future!”. Deputy Head of EC- Ms. Hudina expressed concerns about the rising euroskepticism and invited academia to curb this phenomenon as “we should not remain disillusioned by pessimism”. This goes in line with raising awareness of the European Citizenship and the rights Europeans possess. Ms. Hudina concluded by stating that “the EU is like a book, we should continue writing the book”. “After all,” –Ms. Hudina noted- “the EU is a cultural and social project in addition to its economic goals”.

The former journalist, political analysts, critic and now Member of the European Parliament- Mr. Ivo Vajgl, did not hide a dose of disillusionment from the very beginning of the Keynote: “As an EU MP, I have no other choice but to believe in the promising future of the EU”. He contended that Euroskeptic parties take increasing share in the leadership of the EU. He reflected back on the first years of his mandate in the European Parliament when he “was amazed by the openness and democratic discussion in the EU”. The more the end of the mandate is approaching, however, the

more he realizes the deficit of a democratic discourse. In his observation “small countries are not given the chance and have no power in the decision making”. On the future of the EU, MP Vajgl raised the question “should the Union become a Federation?”- an idea promoted by Slovenian President Borut Pahor. MP Vajgl openly opposed this idea as this will understand a demise of the national identity. Indeed, he reminded that “Slovenian and European identity go together”.

Overall, MP Vajgl judged that “the EU performance is very poor. The EU does not have a common policy. The EU is not a viable player and does not resolve issues.”

MP Vajgl’s criticism was also accompanied by radical ideas such as his proposal to Slovenian Government to grant a political asylum to Edward Snowden, an US whistleblower charged for leaking classified NSA disclosures. MP Vajgl additionally proposed Snowden to be nominated for the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought established and awarded by the European Parliament.

Regarding the Western Balkans countries and their prospects for EU integration, MP Vajgl asserted that they have reached different levels of integration. He started with Croatia- the first WB country to enter the European Union this year: “The European Union has been unjust to Croatia for granting accession after, instead of before the acceptance of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007”. After Croatia, MP Vajgl discussed country per country the prospects of and challenges to the EU membership:

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Since 2003 there is little progress and rising challenges to BiH’s integration with the EU. However, MP Vajgl did not spare criticism by stating that “it is the EU and the US that are making this process more difficult with their interventionism in BiH, this should be left to the local leadership.” He also called Western Countries to “abandon the idea that the Dayton agreement is applicable forever”.

Kosovo: this October (2013) negotiations of the Stabilization and Association Agreement between the EU and Kosovo started with expected date of conclusion in 2014. However, the unresolved issue with Serbia and the absence of international recognition by some EU member-states still remains a challenge.

Macedonia: in MP’s Vajgl words “Macedonia keeps making auto goals by insisting on policies that annoy neighbors, Greeks and Bulgarians in particular, and this doesn't make any sense nor lead anywhere”. This frustrates neighbors and “Greeks are tough players, as we have also seen with the case of Cyprus” inferred MP Vajgl concluding that “this does not excuse Macedonians to continue with their nationalistic agenda”.

Montenegro: “Montenegro is on a good way to the EU but Serbia should stop intervening” briefly mentioned MP Vajgl.

Serbia: Belgrade is stuck with the Kosovo issue but “it would be smarter if Vojvodina developed separate integration policies” maintained MP Vajgl.

The overall conclusion was that the path to the EU is not in the strengthening of the institutional power but in the enhancement of the regional cooperation. MP Vajgl have openly proposed that the above WB countries should enter the EU all together and at the same time, analogous to the

acceptance of 10 instead of just two countries (Slovenia and Estonia) in 2004- an extreme proposal with no supporters so far.

Prof. Dimitar Mircev from Cyril and Methodius University who was among the participants of the conference, commented on MP Vajgl's remarks on Macedonia by saying: "for 5 years the European Commission produces favorable reports and proposals for the initiation of the negotiation process for Macedonian accession into the EU." Secondly, Prof. Mircev refuted the assertions that Macedonia is carrying out a certain nationalistic agenda as it also has an Albanian party in the coalition of the government and it is the only country in the region that recognizes the minority rights of all ethnicities.

MP Vajgl on this responded with: "I have the greatest sympathy for Macedonians... but I don't see why you have to build expensive monuments and horses in Skopje and it is this nationalism I was referring to"- more specifically referring to the Skopje 2014 project.

The conference then proceeded with:

1. Open Roundtables on: (i) Management Diversity; (ii) Interdisciplinary Perspective on Post-Yugoslav Space; (iii) The Europeanisation of Civil Society in the Former Yugoslav Republics; (iv) the Role of Stereotypes in Economic Cooperation among Western Balkan States and the EU;
2. Working Panels on: (i) Networking among Higher Education Institutions in post-Yugoslav Space I and II; (ii) Foreign policies of former Yugoslav States – I and II; (iii) Efficient Innovation Policy;
3. Open PhD Candidates' Panels on: (i) Ongoing Challenges for the EU; (ii) EU, Institutions, and International Affairs; (iii) EU Policies.

Dr. Angela Velkova