



A NEW EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS OR MORE OF THE SAME?

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INTRODUCTION

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation welcomes the publication of the new Strategy “A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans” which signals a revived commitment to the accession process in the region. To address the decrease in the attractiveness of the EU in recent years and with the region being back in the spotlight, the Strategy indicates the EU’s willingness to step up its efforts to support transformation in Western Balkan countries through tailor-made initiatives. Concrete membership prospects are offered to those countries able to carry out reforms and abide by democratic standards. While the Strategy is a step in the right direction, the lack of self-reflection on past mistakes, some of which are analysed in this paper, gives rise to doubts as to whether the EU is able and willing to play a bigger role in supporting the countries tackling some of the most sensitive and long-standing issues affecting the region.

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, a Swedish women’s rights and peace organisation born in 1993 in response to reports of abuses suffered by women during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, has been supporting local women’s organisations in the region ever since. Since the end of the war, women’s organisations have tirelessly engaged in the promotion of human rights, gender equality, rule of law, democratic reforms and peaceful coexistence of communities across the ethnic divides. With the support of the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, women’s organisations developed common messages for the future of the region from a women’s rights perspective including on the EU accession process which, by and large, should better reflect the needs and views of civil society and citizens at large. Based on the current Strategy, the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and its Partner Organisations would like to encourage the EU, and in particular DG NEAR to:

1) ENSURE REFORMS SUPPORTED BY THE EU ARE CONFLICT-SENSITIVE AND GENDER-SENSITIVE

Key reforms pushed through in recent years as part of the accession process have often been blind to the needs of a post-conflict society and gender-blind. The Reform Agenda adopted in 2015 in BiH, is a case in point. After the deadlock over sensitive political issues

such as the Constitutional reform and the 2014 violent social protests, the EU decided to change strategy and focus on much needed socio-economic reforms.

However, such austerity-driven reforms have not been informed by either a gender or a human rights assessment and are not part of an overall plan for post-conflict recovery and for restoring social justice. The Reform Agenda fails to recognize and assess the challenges of post-conflict economic recovery and seems to ignore that tight fiscal policies, cut-backs in public expenses, liberalization of trade and similar measures tend to disproportionately hit already vulnerable groups as well as women. The EU as the actor with greatest leverage on reforms bears a responsibility to ensure that reforms are just and do not further impoverish, weaken and disenfranchise citizens.

2) BETTER USE ITS LEVERAGE TO PROMOTE VALUES, RULE OF LAW, FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AND PROMOTE LONG-TERM CHANGE

The new Strategy puts the rule of law, fundamental rights and governance back at the heart of the EU’s approach to the Western Balkans, recognizing that these are the “most pressing issues” for the region. This is a very welcome development. In 2014, the socio-economic challenges facing most countries in the region prompted the EU to shift its focus on economic reforms and governance. Together with International Financial Institutions the EU had pledged to support the countries in their transition to a market economy and build their capacity to face competitive pressure of the EU’s internal market. **It was assumed that economic growth would have led to increased stability and strengthened democratic governance and rule of law in the region.** While it is still early days to assess the impact of this approach, the current situation suggests that reform efforts and measures to strengthen the economy in many countries in the region have come to the expense of values and human rights. In 2017, on the occasion of the mid-term evaluations of the external financing instruments of the EU, it emerged that the EU’s ability to promote its values – human rights, democracy, rule of law – through its external action in partner countries has declined.¹ The EU should try to reverse this trend in line with its key values and mission enshrined

¹ Coherence Report – Insights from the External Evaluation of the External Financing Instruments of the EU (2017)

in Article 3 of the Lisbon Treaty and better use its leverage in the accession negotiations to promote and sustain reforms which take into account and promote human rights and fundamental values.

3) INCLUDE GENDER EQUALITY AS A KEY OBJECTIVE IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE ACCESSION PROCESS

Gender equality is one of the founding values of the EU, enshrined in the EU Treaties and in policy commitments and one of the specific objectives of the Instrument for Pre-Accession II, the key instrument funding countries in the region. With the second Gender Action Plan, adopted in 2015, the EU set some ambitious objectives to transform lives of women and girls through EU external relations which are also applicable to the enlargement countries. However, in practice gender equality is at best treated as a “cross-cutting issue” which competes with other thematic issues and is rarely discussed in policy and political dialogues. **Studies² show that gender equality is closely linked with peace and stability. Peace is crucial to promote gender equality and gender inequality can undermine peace efforts and also drive violence.** In a region which had been affected by a conflict characterised by unprecedented levels of sexual violence and entrenched power imbalances between men and women, investing in and supporting gender equality should be an objective per se and not just a “cross-cutting issue” as it is generally understood in the EU structures. Kvinna till Kvinna hopes that the revised EU approach indicated in the Strategy will also put fighting inequalities high among the priorities of the accession process as gender equality is a key measure of any democratic society. Evidence shows that democratic ideals of inclusiveness, accountability, transparency cannot be achieved if inequalities are not tackled with dedicated policies, laws and funding.

4) SUPPORT RECONCILIATION, PEACEBUILDING, TRUTH-SEEKING AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

A deterioration of democratic standards, the rise in nationalistic rhetoric, the silencing of civil society and media, segregated education in multi-ethnic communities are all worrying signals that conflict rhetoric is not over and that reconciliation is more urgent than ever. The EU has for too long pretended to ignore that the Western Balkans is a post-conflict region and avoided to play a hands-on role in promoting peace on the assumption that stable and accountable institutions together with a stronger economy

would equip the countries with tools to deal with the legacies of the war. This has not been the case. **Addressing social, economic and political consequences of the war as well as grave human rights violations occurred during the war should be an aim in itself as well as a pre-condition for the countries in the Western Balkans to join the EU.** The EU is a peace actor and itself a successful peace project, in this capacity it should use its experience in promoting peace and reconciliation also in the Western Balkans by further integrating peacebuilding in the accession process. Kvinna till Kvinna welcomes the fact that flagship initiative to support transitional justice, fight impunity on war crimes and work towards a solution for the issue of missing persons and landmines has been included in the new Strategy.

5) SUPPORT THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY, INCLUDING THAT OF WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS, TO BUILD A DEMOCRATIC STATE

Civil society proved to be a key actor for change in the region by promoting reforms, holding the governments to account, working at local level to build cohesion, delivering integrated education in multi-ethnic societies and pushing for reconciliation. In this context, women's organisations played and continue to play a central role in fighting for justice, reparations and services for women who suffered during the war and were completely ignored during the peace process, then promoting legislative and policy changes on gender equality and supporting the establishment of gender equality mechanisms. **However, the crucial role of civil society and that of women's organisations in particular, has neither been sufficiently recognized by the EU in political statements at times where this would have been helpful nor adequately financed.** Kvinna till Kvinna regrets that the EU has again missed an opportunity to speak up about the crackdown on civil society being carried out by political elites. No flagship initiative among the six included in the Strategy is focused on strengthening and supporting civil society as a key actor for transformation in the region and defending civic space. The Strategy only refers to the need to establish an “inclusive structured dialogue on reform priorities” with civil society but again fails to use its leverage on governments and elites to make this a key condition for accession.

By Giulia Pasquinelli, EU Advocacy Associate, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation.

² For example, Equal Power Lasting Peace by Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2012).

THE KVINNA TILL KVINNA FOUNDATION AND ITS PARTNER ORGANISATIONS WOULD LIKE TO URGE THE EU TO:

- 1** Use adequate tools such as gender analysis, conflict analysis and gender and human rights impact assessments to inform the development of gender-just and conflict-sensitive economic and social reforms
- 2** Use its leverage and conditionality mechanisms to promote gender equality, fundamental rights and rule of law as a key component of the Accession Process
- 3** Ensure gender equality becomes an objective of the accession process in its own right and is prioritized in practice in line with the commitments made by the EU with the current Gender Action Plan
- 4** Support peacebuilding, reconciliation, truth-seeking and transitional justice as a key component of the region's transformation towards stable and democratic societies
- 5** Meaningfully support and fund civil society, including women's organisations. Use its leverage to make the involvement of civil society an essential component of the Accession Process



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