



2023. THINK TANK KORČULA SCHOOL

25 – 26 August 2023 (Hybrid (in person/ZOOM))

Transforming Politics through a Gender Lens

Hard Political Choices Call for Imperative Political and Ideological Responses

- i. The Balkans and Ukraine – Lessons learned
- ii. Regional Perspectives – Socialdemocracy 3.0

THINK TANK-KORČULA SCHOOL



The 2023 Korčula School think tank, twelfth in a series, brought together **72 participants (56% women and 44% men)** from progressive and socialdemocratic parties and

socialdemocratic foundations in the region of the Western Balkans and from European socialdemocratic parties and institutions.

The overarching topic was “Hard Political Choices – Call for Imperative Political and Ideological Responses” and the discussions were divided into two main clusters – 'Balkans and Ukraine – Lessons learned' (the pre- Korčula Think Tank session) and the 'Regional Perspectives – Socialdemocracy 3.0'. There were also two special sessions on capacity development and the presentation of the FEPS/CEE Gender Network project on the gender pay gap in the region. Gender equality was mainstreamed throughout the discussions as an intersectional issue.

Zoren Zaev, the former Prime Minister of North Macedonia and former President of the Socialdemocratic Union of North Macedonia was honoured at the 2023 Korčula School think tank with a certificate of appreciation for his courageous, tireless, dedicated and invaluable contribution to democracy, human rights, gender equality and the advancement of women, socialdemocracy and progress in North Macedonia and to peace, regional cooperation and mutual understanding in the Western Balkans.



2023 Korčula School Video reports:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3SQNop5GN4>
Narrative Report: <https://ceegendernetwork.eu>



The Western Balkans and Ukraine -Lessons learned

Preventive diplomacy and early intervention are crucial in preventing conflicts from escalating. Long-term solutions are necessary to address the root causes of conflicts and underlying issues such as nationalism, inequality, and historical grievances. This requires a comprehensive approach that includes political, economic, and social reforms, as well as efforts to promote reconciliation and dialogue.



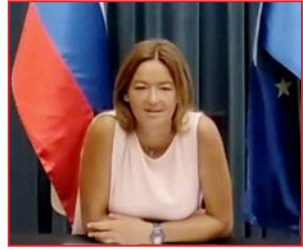
The conflict in the Western Balkans was fuelled by political, national, and economic interests, often with external support. International cooperation and support remain essential in resolving conflicts. The Dayton Agreement was only made possible through the involvement of international actors and their commitment to finding a solution. Today, there is a concern about the influence of Russia in the Western Balkan region, and the need to counteract the fuelling of totalitarianism, nationalism, and ethnic conflict which exists.



However, the commitment to the principle of "do no harm" in stopping and resolving wars and conflicts should be one of the guiding principles with a view to long-term and sustainable solutions in peace making and peacebuilding. The international community often views its involvement in peace agreements as successes, but many of these are short-sighted and short-lived and may create future problems.



Lessons learned from past conflicts and “frozen” conflicts highlight the importance of a comprehensive and sustainable approach to peacebuilding which includes addressing root causes, promoting inclusivity and equal rights, fostering international cooperation, and engaging in preventive diplomacy.



Economic and human security should be prioritized alongside military security. This means addressing issues such as poverty, inequality, and social exclusion, which can contribute to conflict and instability. In this, addressing gender related issues is crucial as they are intersectoral.



Progressive and socialdemocratic political forces, committed to internationalism, solidarity and peace should promote a balanced and inclusive approach to international relations, dialogue, diplomacy, and negotiations as key tools for resolving conflicts and search for alternative measures to ensure European and global security. Military intervention should be a last resort.

This highlights the importance of unity among progressives in the face of new geopolitical shifts and alliances being forged by the right. It is important to engage with civil society and feminist groups, as they often have valuable insights and perspectives on peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Their voices should be heard, and their contributions acknowledged.

Comprehensive assistance should be provided to women and children in Ukraine, but equally assistance should be provided to refugees who remain in Europe with adequate measures to ensure their employment and integration and prevent their poverty and all types of exploitation, including sexual exploitation and trafficking.



Issues of migrants and refugees, unless addressed through bold social democratic policies provide an opportunity for conservatives and anti-immigrant right-wing groups to tighten immigration policies, build fences, and exploit the plight of migrants and refugees, and finally, further weaken the social democratic political option.

Regional Perspectives and the EU integration



Political survival in the Balkans requires optimism, and it is important for progressive parties to maintain that optimism due to internal and external factors like the EU integration.

The EU needs to show a clear and consistent commitment to the Western Balkans and provide a roadmap for their integration. It would be also beneficial to prevent vetoes or conditionalities from some EU member states when it comes to negotiations with the countries in the region. The lack of progress and uncertainty in the integration process is demoralizing for both the public and progressive and social democratic parties in the region. This creates a difficult political

environment for socialdemocrats to argue for EU integration and dispel the anti-Western propaganda.

The EU should deliver on its promises and provide a clear path forward and timeframe. The EU must prioritise values and not just economic benefits, while the countries in the region need



Regional Perspectives and the EU integration



to be more assertive in their negotiations and take charge of their own destiny and quicken reforms. Countries of the Western Balkans need to enter the EU as a group and in

preparing for integration to cooperate more closely on concrete issues to provide mutual support. The role of socialdemocratic parties and foundations is important towards this end.

Overall, the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU remains still uncertain which demands more commitment, cooperation, and mutual trust. The outcome of European Parliamentary elections and the constitution of the new European Commission will be crucial for furthering the integration process.

The region of the Western Balkans is still plagued by challenges posed by authoritarian, nationalist, and populist politics and overall those of fear. Progressives and socialdemocrats should strive to offer a positive alternative and rally people around a message of hope rather than fear. They should also assist in advocating for EU integration on two fronts – that of reforms, economy, climate change and those of common values.

The outcomes of the upcoming elections in the region are uncertain in view of strengthening right wing politics. There are also concerns about the voting behaviour of the young generation, particularly those who have grown up in unstable countries with crippled education systems where criminals, including war criminals, are



Regional Perspectives and the EU integration



heroes and where nationalism and the meddling of the Church prevail. These societies have been "polluted" by such politics and impact citizen's political choices.

Transition was based on the



model of neoliberal transition and the consequences of this model have come to roost. Liberal and corruptive policies are basically creating an open space for breaking up the social fibre, exacerbating economic inequalities, curtailing social welfare, increasing poverty, and raising existential fears among the population. This is fertile ground for corruption and a return to nationalism, patriarchalism and alike.

Addressing corruption means addressing these social and economic inequalities, designing better anti-corruption programmes and policies, their implementation and monitoring that includes close cooperation with European and international anti-corruption institutions. Brining women into leading decision-making position should also be a measure since research shows that women are more averse to corruption for many reasons. Closing the political gender gap and fighting corruption go hand in hand.



SOCIALDEMOCRACY 3.0



To address the brain drain and right wing nationalist “brainwashing” in the Western Balkans, social democratic leadership needs to take a proactive approach. This means actively leading and managing the political and ideological discourse in society, rather than simply reacting to the right-wing rhetoric. Socialdemocrats need to lead by

example!

The outcome of the European elections will have a significant impact on the Balkan countries, potentially creating new alliances and requiring a strategic response from socialist and social democratic parties in the European Parliament.



To counter the right-wing agenda, social democrats must clearly articulate their



SOCIALDEMOCRACY 3.0

ideological objectives and stand against the disruption and reversal of progressive policies. Declarations and manifestos should be action oriented, realistic, sustainable, and strategic. This approach should prioritize the interests of all citizens, especially women and youth, and envision a new kind of progressive and



socialdemocratic responses that are democratic, feminist, non-racial, environmentally conscious, and focused on revamping the welfare state.

Solidarity, internationalism, and enhanced cooperation should be central to this vision. This requires “character” and courage of

socialdemocratic leadership to challenge the status quo and the willingness to listen to different perspectives. It means being open-minded and flexible, while remaining true to the core values.



SOCIALDEMOCRACY 3.0



Addressing gender equality from their equal participation in decision making to tackling the gender pay gap calls for enhanced deliberate measures, as well as an evaluation of progress to date to shape the next “phase” in advocacy and policy making. Concrete measures to promote work-life balance, including affordable and accessible childcare services, parental



The participants of the **2023 Korcula School** have said this about the work of the CEE Gender Network and the Korcula School think tank:



- The CEE Gender Network and the Korcula School think tank have an important role to play in coordination social democratic parties, foundations representatives of all countries of the region and of countries of the EU and leaders and representative of the civil society. It is an important high-level event and a leading voice in Central and Eastern Europe regarding the debate on gender politics in the region. “We need to define the expectations for the next ten years.” This is a good mixture of policy makers.



- The importance of these gatherings cannot be underestimated. In view of the serious challenges facing the region, and Europe it is imperative to strengthen cooperation and together find common strategies to fight back for peace.

therefore, especially in view of the roles and scope of political work done by other social democratic and progressive actors, have a strong role to play in coordinating Social Democratic politics in the Western Balkans and in European integration efforts.

- The Network and the Korcula School think tank



- Cooperation and connectivity among socialdemocrats in the region has decreased in the last decade and needs to be revitalised. In this sense the Korcula School is very important. CEE Gender Network can be a platform for this coordination and especially for bringing together a partnership between Ukraine and the region.



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