

European Territorial Cooperation and EU enlargement

Cities and regions as the foundation of the EU and their role in the EU accession process of candidate countries

Dear Mr President Antonione, President Pack, Mr. Zilli, Mr Dipiazza, Mr. Consul General of Slovenia,

It is a great pleasure to be here today and a great honor to speak as the newly elected president of ALDA, the very well-known organization in Friuli Venezia Giulia for its commitment to democracy, Europe and also for its long lasting support for the integration of the Western Balkans in to the EU. Since the war started in Ukraine, ALDA immediately engaged in assisting cities and citizens of Ukraine. But Antonella will tell you more in detail on various aspects of ALDA's work.

I come from the Serbian based organization Center for Democracy Foundation, which marks 30 years of work along which it supported democratic development, human capital, advocated and protected human rights, while particularly promoting European integration, European values, rule of law, regional cooperation, gender equality. Most of our attention was given to youth in Serbia and youth in the region. In the aftermath of the conflicts and wars, at the beginning of the new century, we were happy to see so many enthusiastic young people that found themselves Europeans, that were impatient to join the EU and hoped that this objective will be rapidly achieved.

Where did this enthusiasm disappear over the last twenty, twenty-five years? It is a very long process. We are not happy to see that many young people in the region are marked with the older generation's experience and spirit of the 90s, with serious doubts in democracy, in European values, many of them do not believe that accession to the EU will ever happen.

The Russian invasion on Ukraine has opened the question of the future of Europe in a new way, we regard the future of Europe through different lenses now. After years of hesitation and continuous postponement of the future enlargement debate and concrete steps, it has become clear that Europe of today and Europe of future needs to be united and needs to be enlarged. New window of opportunity is open for the Western Balkans and European perspective was also offered to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

Recent decision on granting candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2022 and on opening EU accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina in March 2024 is further encouragement for all countries aspiring to join the EU.

As well as Alda, we in the foundation think that democracy, democratic and transparent democratic procedures and sustainable development, in social, economic and environmental dimension is crucial for renewed citizens' trust in institutions, in the policy making process.

Development shall incorporate social dimension and enable eradication of poverty, equal opportunities, good education and access to health care. People in the Western Balkans do not want European Integration

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to be an elitist project, but rather a process that will bring better life to many. And a better life includes no corruption, better public service, rooted good governance in our communities, sustainable investments and good jobs with decent work standards applied.

Since the autumn 2023 the European Union has invested a lot of energy and resources to come up with the New Growth Plan on the Western Balkans followed by the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, the financial pillar of the Growth Plan. They will support a range of socioeconomic and fundamental reforms in the region by applying new conditionality mechanisms.

In addition, it will support Western Balkan economies to speed up regional economic cooperation as a stepping stone to European value chains and greater competitiveness. This should help them integrate smoothly into the EU single market. More than this, the Growth Plan shall result in advanced socio-economic convergence of the WB and of implementing fundamental reforms. The economies of the WB have been lagging behind, currently standing at 27% of the EU average and will likely take decades to reach the EU average. With the New Growth Plan, the EU and its member states expressed their true interest and willingness to support socio economic development of the region.

In this process each and every support and assistance are needed. EU bodies, member states, regions, cities... Cities and regions are so important – as partners in developing good governance and resilient communities, in addressing new challenges such as migration and climate change but also in creating solidarity in Europe. As so many cities did with Mariupol, for example. It is from modern and developed cities that our policy makers learn and transpose good practice. Modern and developed cities, where services are adjusted to the needs of citizens, are models that we shall take in addressing our citizens` priorities. Because it is on a local level that people really see what governance is like, to which extent it is democratic, inclusive and accountable.

And last but not the least, let us not forget the importance of the civil society organizations and the role they should play in policy making process and monitoring of reforms, the role that has been even more accentuated in the debates about the Growth Plan. More consultations and more involvement of civil society is required. Here comes Alda with its capacity to approach, gather and include citizens, citizens of the European Union and citizens of the Western Balkans, but also to create linkages among them.

Let me at the end express our gratitude to CEI for the continuous support to many of ALDA programmes in the Balkans. We wish that cooperation will continue in the future and hope that our memorandum of understanding will be further implemented with our new joint projects.

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