

Post-conflict Reconciliation Initiatives in the Western Balkans in Light of the Rise of Right-wing Ideologies in Europe

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore post-conflict reconciliation initiatives in the Western Balkans, with a particular focus on their connection to regional cooperation efforts. While significant progress has been made in rebuilding trust through mechanisms such as truth commissions like RECOM, transitional justice, and dialogue, the rise of right-wing ideologies in Europe presents a growing threat to these reconciliation efforts. Nationalism and populism, often driven by historical grievances, continue to challenge the process of healing and regional cooperation. In light of geopolitical changes and the rise of the far right in Europe, which will impact the Western Balkans - geographically a part of Europe, it becomes increasingly important to examine this issue. The paper will examine post-conflict reconciliation initiatives, using the case study of RECOM, and analyze how regional initiatives such as the Berlin Process and the Regional Cooperation Council play a crucial role in addressing these challenges. Additionally, it will assess strategies for promoting lasting peace and stability in the face of increasing political division and the resurgence of nationalist ideologies in the region. The paper will also emphasize the need to view peace and security as vital for sustaining regional cooperation in the Western Balkans.

Keywords

peace, peacebuilding, regional cooperation, nationalism, populism

1. Introduction and Methodology

The Western Balkans experienced a series of brutal conflicts during the 1990s, following the disintegration of Yugoslavia. These wars left deep ethnic divisions, unresolved traumas, and significant challenges for rebuilding trust and fostering peace. Since then, numerous reconciliation initiatives have been implemented at both the domestic and international levels, aiming to rebuild relationships among formerly warring communities,

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address war crimes, and establish lasting peace. However, reconciliation remains fragile, uneven, and frequently politicized. Meanwhile, across Europe, we are witnessing the steady rise of right-wing ideologies, often marked by nationalism, historical revisionism, and a retreat from liberal democratic values. This ideological shift is not isolated from the Balkans. In fact, it interacts with local narratives and political dynamics, often undermining efforts toward reconciliation.

This paper explores the following research question: ***How does the rise of right-wing ideologies in Europe influence post-conflict reconciliation initiatives in the Western Balkans?*** In the context of ongoing transitional justice efforts and regional stabilization, understanding the external political forces that shape reconciliation processes is crucial. The resurgence of right-wing ideologies across Europe, often characterized by nationalism, Euroscepticism, and historical revisionism, raises important questions about their potential to hinder or reshape reconciliation narratives and policies in post-conflict societies.

To answer this research question, the paper adopts a **qualitative research methodology** combining:

- **Literature analysis** of academic research on reconciliation and transitional justice.
- **Policy analysis** of regional cooperation frameworks and European policy documents.
- **Case study analysis** focusing on the RECOM initiative as a regional truth-seeking mechanism.

The RECOM initiative is selected as a case study due to its regional scope, its civil society-driven character, and its unique attempt to establish a shared factual record across post-Yugoslav states. This makes it particularly suitable for analyzing the interaction between reconciliation processes and broader political and ideological trends. While the qualitative approach enables an in-depth understanding of political narratives and institutional dynamics, it also has limitations, particularly in terms of generalizability. The analysis therefore focuses on identifying patterns and relationships rather than producing universally applicable conclusions.

Primary sources include policy reports and institutional publications produced by organisations and initiatives such as the **The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), RECOM, Regional Cooperation Council, The Berlin Process**, as well as academic literature addressing transitional justice and right-wing populism. Secondary sources include journal articles and policy analyses focusing on political developments in Europe and the Western Balkans.

Through this mixed analytical approach, the paper examines how ideological shifts within Europe influence reconciliation dynamics in post-conflict societies in the Western Balkans. In order to effectively address the research question, the paper is structured into several key sections. The first section provides an overview of reconciliation initiatives in the Western Balkans, focusing on the historical context, institutional mechanisms, and current challenges facing the region.

The second section maps the rise and evolution of right-wing ideologies in contemporary Europe, analyzing their main features, political platforms, and influence on both national and European Union level policies. The third section investigates the impact of these ideologies on reconciliation processes in the Western Balkans, highlighting specific cases where right-wing discourse or policies have interfered with or influenced regional post-conflict dynamics.

The paper concludes by summarizing the main findings and reflecting on the broader implications for peacebuilding and transitional justice in the region. Through this structure, the analysis aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how ideological shifts in Europe intersect with the fragile processes of reconciliation in the Western Balkans.

2. Literature review

The academic literature on reconciliation in the Western Balkans has developed significantly since the early 2000s. Scholars have examined the role of transitional justice institutions, civil society initiatives, and international actors in facilitating post-conflict reconciliation (Petričušić & Blondel, 2012; Haider, 2021). Research highlights that transitional justice mechanisms such as war crimes tribunals and truth commissions play a critical role in establishing accountability and documenting wartime abuses (Haider, 2021). **The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)** is frequently cited as a landmark institution that contributed to international criminal justice while also shaping public understanding of the conflicts.

At the same time, scholars argue that reconciliation in the Western Balkans remains fragile due to competing national narratives, political manipulation of historical memory, and limited societal acceptance of judicial findings (Zelenović, 2023). Recent scholarship has also begun to examine the influence of broader political trends on reconciliation. Studies highlight how the resurgence of right-wing populism across Europe has strengthened nationalist actors in the Balkans and undermined support for transitional justice initiatives (Džihić, 2023).

According to Džihić (2023), far-right political movements increasingly promote narratives that question international justice institutions and glorify nationalist historical interpretations. Policy reports likewise emphasize that reconciliation cannot be achieved solely through institutional reforms but requires broader societal engagement, including educational reform and youth participation (Mildner & Bories, 2023). The Aspen Institute report on reconciliation in the Western Balkans argues that unresolved historical narratives continue to shape political discourse and interethnic relations across the region (Mildner & Bories, 2023).

Furthermore, several studies highlight the importance of regional cooperation initiatives, including the **Regional Cooperation Council** and the **Berlin Process**, which aim to foster economic integration and political dialogue among Western Balkan states (Mirel, 2018). *Together, this body of literature demonstrates that reconciliation in the Western Balkans is influenced not only by domestic political dynamics but also by broader European political developments.*

3. Overview of Reconciliation Initiatives in the Western Balkans

Since the end of the Yugoslav wars, a range of reconciliation initiatives have been pursued in the Western Balkans. These efforts have come from both domestic institutions and international actors, with varying degrees of success. The primary goal has been to deal with the legacy of war, ensure justice, and promote long-term peace and cooperation. In this paper, these initiatives will be elaborated through three main categories: judicial mechanisms, including international and domestic war crimes tribunals; truth-seeking initiatives, such as truth commissions and civil society led documentation efforts; and regional cooperation organisations, which aim to foster dialogue, mutual understanding, and collaborative approaches to dealing with the past.

3.1. Judicial mechanisms

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) played a central role in prosecuting war crimes and establishing facts about the conflicts. The tribunal was a United Nations court that dealt with war crimes committed during the conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s (ICTY, n.d.). During its mandate from 1993 to 2017, the ICTY significantly influenced the development of international humanitarian law, provided victims with an opportunity to testify about the atrocities they experienced, and demonstrated that those suspected of bearing the greatest responsibility for crimes committed during armed conflicts can be held accountable (ICTY, n.d.). Some of the most well-known verdicts include the cases against Radovan Karadžić (IT-95-5/18), Ratko Mladić (IT-09-92), Dragan

Obrenović (IT-02-60/2), related to the Srebrenica genocide, as well as the case of Jadranko Prlić et al. (IT-04-74). Although the tribunal completed its work in 2017, its legacy continues through domestic judicial institutions in the region.

Domestic war crimes courts have also played an important role in addressing crimes committed during the conflicts, although they have sometimes been criticized for political bias or limited effectiveness (ICTY, n.d.).

3.2. Truth-seeking initiatives

The RECOM initiative represents one of the most significant regional efforts to establish the truth about war crimes and serious human rights violations committed during the conflicts following the breakup of Yugoslavia. Emerging from civil society, RECOM seeks to create a shared and factual account of the past through a regional, extra-judicial mechanism. Its inclusive and participatory approach aims to bridge national narratives and foster long-term reconciliation across post-Yugoslav states.

The RECOM Reconciliation Network initiative represents a regional effort to establish the facts about war crimes and other serious human rights violations committed in the former Yugoslavia between 1 January 1991 and 31 December 2001 (RECOM, n.d.). The RECOM process was launched through a debate on mechanisms for truth-telling and disclosure of facts about the past. The debate took place in May 2006 at the First Regional Forum for Transitional Justice, organized by the Humanitarian Law Center, the Research and Documentation Center and Documenta - Center for Dealing with the Past (RECOM, n.d.). Participants, representatives of non-governmental organisations and associations of families of missing persons and victims from post-Yugoslav countries, supported a regional approach to establishing the facts about war crimes, noting that the conflicts took place across several countries and that victims and perpetrators often do not live in the same state (RECOM, n.d.). The Coalition for RECOM was established at the Fourth Regional Forum for Transitional Justice held on 28 October 2008 in Pristina. Over the following three years, the coalition initiated one of the most comprehensive social debates in the region. The consultation process on the mandate of RECOM involved approximately 6,700 representatives of civil society, including human rights organisations, victims and families of victims and missing persons, refugees, veterans, lawyers, journalists, and other public figures (RECOM, n.d.). During numerous round tables, participants presented suggestions and views regarding the mandate of this proposed regional interstate body tasked with documenting facts about war crimes and other serious human rights violations, including information about victims and perpetrators (RECOM, n.d.). The views expressed during these consultations were incorporated into

the Draft Statute of RECOM. This document was later analyzed by an Expert Group composed of delegates from presidential offices and representatives of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina from participating countries in the region. After a year of work, on 28 October 2014 the Expert Group submitted proposed amendments to the Statute, which were adopted by the Coalition Assembly on 14 November 2014 (RECOM, n.d.).

According to the Draft Statute, RECOM is envisioned as an intergovernmental commission established by the successor states of the former Yugoslavia. This extra-judicial body would be responsible for investigating allegations of war crimes and other serious human rights violations, compiling a list of all war victims, and collecting information about detention facilities and other sites of deprivation of liberty connected with the conflicts (RECOM, n.d.). The commission would operate independently of the governments that establish it and would be financed through donations. The RECOM initiative calls upon all post-Yugoslav states to jointly establish this commission in order to determine facts that are essential for understanding the history of the region and for building a shared future based on acknowledgement of all victims, by the end of 2014, more than 580,000 people from across the former Yugoslavia had supported the initiative for establishing RECOM by signing the petition. The RECOM Reconciliation Network continues to document human losses and detention sites, emphasizing the responsibility of the successor states of the former Yugoslavia to jointly record the approximately 130,000 victims of the wars between 1991 and 2001, including those who lost their lives and those who remain missing (RECOM, n.d.). In recent years, the focus has been on documenting victims of the war in Croatia, cases of abductions and disappearances in Kosovo, and detention facilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina that were not fully addressed in proceedings before the ICTY or domestic courts, despite political challenges, the RECOM process has laid an important foundation for regional truth-seeking and documentation, by promoting a fact-based understanding of the conflicts and acknowledging all victims, the initiative contributes to the development of a broader culture of remembrance and accountability in the Western Balkans (RECOM, n.d.).

3.3. Regional cooperation organisation

Regional cooperation has played a central role in post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation in the Western Balkans. Recognizing that the legacy of the 1990s conflicts cannot be addressed solely within national frameworks, several multilateral platforms have emerged to foster dialogue, stability, and integration. Among the most prominent are the **Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)** and the Berlin Process, both of which support regional cooperation as a key mechanism for promoting socio-economic

development, strengthening good governance, and advancing the European integration agenda (RCC, n.d.). These initiatives serve not only to deepen political and economic ties but also to reinforce reconciliation and mutual trust among Western Balkan societies. The RCC is an all-inclusive, regionally owned and led cooperation framework that engages participants from South East Europe (SEE), members of the international community, and donors on topics of regional importance, with the aim of promoting European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

The organisation fosters prosperity and growth through regional action in SEE while advancing integration, envisioning the region as a prosperous space of dialogue, freedom, and mobility, rich in cultural heritage, where citizens feel safe and protected by the rule of law. Key priorities of the RCC include supporting sustainable and equitable economic growth policies to enhance regional economic integration, promoting green and digital transformation, and reducing poverty while narrowing social, economic, and environmental disparities with the European Union. The organisation currently has 46 participants and is headed by Secretary General **Amer Kapetanović**. It is financed by the European Union and its SEE and other Board participants. The RCC has a Secretariat based in Sarajevo and a Liaison Office in Brussels.

3.4. Berlin Process

The Berlin Process was set up in 2014 as a platform to increase cooperation between the Western Balkans Six and the Berlin Process host countries, as well as the EU (Berlin Process, n.d.). It is first and foremost a consistent and inclusive format for all six Western Balkan countries. High-level representatives of the Western Balkan Six (WB6) and their counterparts in Berlin Process host countries meet at least once a year at the Summit and preparatory Ministerial meetings. The Process also involves EU institutions, international financial institutions, and the region's civil society, youth, and business actors. It provides high-level political support, as well as broad outreach and visibility to regional cooperation initiatives and respective policies, including EU connectivity projects in the region (Berlin Process, n.d.).

Over the years, the Berlin Process has continuously evolved and currently consists of the Summit itself, Ministerial Meetings (Foreign, Interior, Economy, Roma), and multiple side events (Digital Summit, Business Forum, Youth Forum, Civil Society Forum, Gender Forum, Science Conference, Purchasing Initiative of German Business, and Agricultural Policy Forum). These events are usually spread throughout the months leading up to the main summit (Berlin Process, n.d.).

Key goals include (Berlin Process, n.d.):

- Economic development through enhanced regional economic cooperation, particularly by deepening the Common Regional Market;
- Strengthening energy security and supporting energy transition;
- Advancing the Green Agenda in alignment with the objectives of the European Green Deal;
- Supporting a Just and Green Transition through the Regional Climate Partnership;
- Development of food systems, agriculture, rural development, and forestry;
- Enhancing regional connectivity through infrastructure projects (road, rail, and digital);
- Improving cooperation in the field of cybersecurity;
- Increasing cooperation in combating organized crime and irregular migration;
- Contributing to reconciliation and fostering exchanges within and between societies in the region;
- Promoting social and economic inclusion of minorities, including Roma, as outlined in Poznań Declaration;
- Supporting business development through policy dialogue, investor engagement, and initiatives such as the annual Business Forum and the Purchasing Initiative.

Both the Regional Cooperation Council and the Berlin Process demonstrate how structured regional frameworks can support long-term peacebuilding and reconciliation through inclusive dialogue, economic integration, and shared strategic goals. While primarily focused on development and EU convergence, these platforms indirectly contribute to reconciliation by fostering interdependence, people-to-people connectivity, and cross-border cooperation. In doing so, they create a conducive environment for addressing historical grievances and building sustainable peace in the Western Balkans.

4. Mapping Right-Wing Ideologies in Europe

Over the past decade, Europe has witnessed a significant rise in right-wing populist movements, both within mainstream politics and on the political fringes. These ideologies frequently capitalize on fear, national identity, and widespread dissatisfaction with liberal democratic norms. Today, far-right populist parties enjoy strong parliamentary representation across much of Europe and currently participate in government in Croatia, Finland, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Serbia, Slovakia, and Switzerland. Even where they remain in opposition, such parties exert substantial

influence on the agendas of mainstream parties and on public discourse more broadly (Bortun, 2025).

4.1. Recent Electoral Gains

In 2025, right-wing populists made notable electoral advances in Austria, Germany, and France. At the European Union level, this political family achieved one of its most successful outcomes in the June elections for the European Parliament, securing nearly a quarter of all seats (Bortun, 2025). In the United Kingdom, Nigel Farage's Reform UK party received over four million votes in the July general election, further evidence of the growing reach of these movements across the continent.

4.2. Core Ideological Features

Despite differences in national context, far-right populist parties share a number of core ideological features. Central to their worldview is a Manichean dichotomy between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," with the "people" often defined in nativist, ethnocentric, and exclusionary terms. The so-called "elite," blamed for promoting pro-immigration policies, is accused of undermining national culture and the socio-economic well-being of "ordinary" (native) citizens (Bortun, 2025). The contemporary far right reflects some of the most troubling currents in European intellectual and political history, including nationalist essentialism, counter-Enlightenment dogmatism, and authoritarianism. Its message today is structured around three central ideological pillars:

- A chauvinistic and ethnically defined exaltation of the nation;
- Anti-immigrant xenophobia, and;
- Anti-establishment, anti-political populism.

These movements offer followers an exclusive identity, point to clear culprits (the establishment, immigrants), and propose simplistic, radical solutions - such as expelling foreigners or dismantling the existing political system (Rodríguez-Aguilera, 2014).

4.3. Defining Right-Wing Populism

Right-wing populism can be broadly characterized by the following elements:

- Nationalism over multiculturalism;
- Authoritarian tendencies and skepticism toward liberal democratic institutions;
- Anti-immigration rhetoric, often accompanied by Islamophobia;
- Historical revisionism, particularly related to World War II and 20th-century fascism;
- Opposition to core EU values, such as human rights, inclusivity, and transnational justice.

4.4. Notable European Examples

- **Hungary (Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance):** Under Viktor Orbán, Hungary has embraced the concept of “illiberal democracy,” rejected multiculturalism, and aligned itself with revisionist historical narratives. Founded in 1988 as a liberal party, Fidesz has gradually shifted to the far right, particularly after 2015 when Chancellor Angela Merkel introduced a “welcome culture” for refugees. The party now positions itself as the defender of a Christian Europe against foreign influence and seeks to limit the EU’s authority (Hasselbach, 2025).

- **Poland (Law and Justice Party - PiS):** Government efforts have focused on reshaping historical memory and downplaying past state violence, particularly related to World War II.

- **Italy (Brothers of Italy):** A party rooted in post-fascist tradition, advocating strong right-wing nationalism, Catholic identity, and traditional family values.

- **France (National Rally, led by Marine Le Pen):** Known for its strong anti-immigration and anti-EU positions, the party continues to gain traction among mainstream voters.

- **Austria (Freedom Party - FPÖ):** Frequently criticized for xenophobic discourse and references to Nazi-era ideology.

- **Germany (Alternative for Germany - AfD):** The party increasingly questions Germany’s historical responsibility for the Holocaust and strongly opposes immigration, especially from Muslim-majority countries.

Among these, Fidesz stands out as perhaps the most successful far-right party in Europe. With Viktor Orbán at the helm, the party governed Hungary from 1998 to 2002 and has been in power continuously since 2010. The transformation of Fidesz from a liberal youth movement into a dominant far-right force exemplifies the broader trend of ideological radicalization in European politics.

4.5. Common Discursive Strategies

Right-wing populist movements across Europe employ a set of recurring rhetorical and discursive strategies that reinforce their narratives and mobilize support:

- **Victimhood reversal:** Recasting majority populations as victims of multiculturalism, immigration, or political correctness;

- **“Europe for Europeans”:** Opposing EU enlargement, especially in relation to Muslim-majority countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania;

- **Cultural chauvinism:** Undermining minority rights, rejecting transnational reconciliation, and promoting a monocultural national identity.

4.6. Transnational Influence and Implications for the Western Balkans

These ideological currents do not remain confined within national borders. They influence foreign policy, shape media narratives, and affect public opinion across Europe. In particular, they often spill over into the Western Balkans - through political alliances, far-right media content, and diaspora networks, where they threaten to undermine fragile democratic institutions and post-conflict reconciliation processes.

5. Impact on Western Balkans Reconciliation

The rise of right-wing ideologies across Europe has direct and indirect implications for reconciliation processes in the Western Balkans. While these processes were already fragile and often incomplete, the external political climate now reinforces nationalist narratives, undermines trust in international justice, and emboldens denialist rhetoric.

5.1. External Influences

- **Political Support for Nationalist Leaders:** Right-wing political parties and governments within the European Union have at times expressed ideological alignment with nationalist actors in the Western Balkans. These affiliations are often rooted in shared conservative or ethno-nationalist values. A notable example is Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's support for Milorad Dodik, the leader of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), who is known for challenging the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian state. Orbán has, for example, refused to recognize a BiH court's ruling against Dodik, blocked attempts by the EU to sanction him, and provided him public political backing (European Conservative, 2023).

- **Erosion of the European Union's Credibility:** The EU's normative power is undermined when member states tolerate or openly support nationalist rhetoric and actors who contradict the Union's foundational values, including democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. This inconsistency weakens the EU's credibility as a neutral mediator and its capacity to promote democratic transformation in the Western Balkans. For example, although the EU has invested substantial funds in rule of law reforms across the Western Balkans, audits, including by the European Court of Auditors, find that many of these interventions have had only marginal effect on fundamental reforms, especially regarding judicial independence, accountability, and political interference (Politico, 2024).

- **Legitimization of Revisionist Narratives:** The growing presence of far-right discourse in Europe, which often includes the relativization of fascism, the glorification of nationalist movements, and the rejection of

transitional justice, contributes to the normalization of similar narratives in the Western Balkans.

- These trends are manifested through historical revisionism, the denial of war crimes, the rehabilitation of convicted war criminals, and the rejection of collective responsibility for the conflicts of the 1990s. Such dynamics hinder reconciliation processes and the construction of a shared historical memory in the region.

5.2. Internal Consequences in the Western Balkans

- **Strengthening of Local Nationalisms:** Political leaders increasingly exploit the global resurgence of nationalism to bolster their legitimacy. In Serbia, Croatia, and Republika Srpska, identity politics and ethno-nationalist discourses are more frequently invoked as central features of political rhetoric. Commemoration of war crimes becomes politicized, while gestures of apology or reconciliation are often dismissed or condemned as “traitorous” by political actors and segments of the public.

- **Polarization and Denialism:** Denial - or at least significant minimization - of key events such as the Srebrenica genocide and other war crimes is becoming more socially acceptable. Institutional practices contribute to this normalization. Historical revisionism is being embedded into school curricula, media discourse, and official state rhetoric. Textbooks and public statements increasingly reflect contested or divergent narrations of wartime responsibility and victimhood.

- **Weakening of Regional Cooperation:** Political instability and mutual distrust hinder cross-border collaboration, diplomatic dialogue, and the resolution of bilateral issues (for example, Serbia-Kosovo relations). The ideal of a shared, peaceful European future - once a powerful unifying narrative - loses credibility as the European Union itself appears divided, inward-looking, or inconsistent in upholding its own declared values, diminishing its appeal and normative pull in the region.

In conclusion, reconciliation processes in the Western Balkans face mounting challenges driven by both internal dynamics and external influences. The resurgence of right-wing ideologies - regionally and globally - has strengthened nationalist actors, undermined initiatives aimed at confronting the legacy of past conflicts, and contributed to a declining international commitment to transitional justice and post-conflict accountability.

Conclusion

The Western Balkans remains a region in which the past is deeply present. More than two decades after the cessation of armed conflicts, efforts toward post-conflict reconciliation have produced mixed results.

Mechanisms such as the ICTY, domestic courts, civil society led, truth-seeking initiatives like RECOM, and regional cooperation frameworks such as the RCC and the Berlin Process have all played vital roles in promoting accountability, dialogue, and regional integration. Yet, reconciliation in the Western Balkans continues to be a contested and fragile process, shaped not only by local political realities but increasingly influenced by broader ideological trends across Europe.

This paper has examined the impact of the rising tide of right-wing populism and nationalism across Europe on post-conflict reconciliation efforts in the Western Balkans. It has demonstrated that the recent proliferation of far-right ideologies marked by historical revisionism, nativist nationalism, Euroscepticism, and anti-multiculturalism, has introduced new obstacles for reconciliation and peacebuilding in a region still grappling with the legacy of war. Far from being an isolated or regional phenomenon, this ideological shift reflects a broader crisis in liberal democratic values that resonates powerfully in post-conflict societies.

One of the central findings of this analysis is that the rise of right-wing populist parties across Europe has weakened the credibility and consistency of international actors, especially the European Union in supporting transitional justice and democratic reform in the Balkans. While the EU once held strong normative leverage in promoting human rights, reconciliation, and the rule of law, this influence has diminished as right-wing governments within the Union itself challenge these foundational values. This internal contradiction undermines the EU's role as a neutral broker and diminishes its soft power in the region. The perception of a divided and inward-looking EU reduces incentives for meaningful reform and weakens the appeal of the European integration project, which once functioned as a central narrative for post-conflict recovery in the Balkans.

Furthermore, the ideological proximity between far-right parties in Europe and nationalist actors in the Western Balkans has resulted in both direct and indirect support for revisionist and denialist agendas. Political figures such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary have openly supported leaders like Milorad Dodik, whose rhetoric and actions frequently challenge the integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina's state institutions and deny the genocide in Srebrenica. Such alliances provide both political cover and moral validation for nationalist actors, enabling them to resist accountability and to entrench ethno-nationalist narratives within public discourse and state institutions.

Internally, these dynamics have emboldened nationalist elites and further polarized public opinion. Political leaders in countries like Serbia, Croatia, and the entity of Republika Srpska increasingly rely on identity politics to mobilize support and deflect attention from governance failures

or economic stagnation. The instrumentalization of war memory, the glorification of convicted war criminals, and the systematic denial or relativization of war crimes, particularly in political and media narratives, erode the societal foundations necessary for reconciliation. In some cases, this has led to the re-emergence of openly hostile rhetoric between political actors and communities, reversing years of tentative progress in trust-building.

Of particular concern is the way historical revisionism is being institutionalized through educational curricula, official commemorations, and public discourse. This process not only impairs interethnic understanding but also deprives younger generations of the tools needed to critically engage with the past. The risk is the perpetuation of parallel and mutually exclusive historical narratives, which in turn reinforces social divisions and undermines any shared vision of the future. In this context, initiatives like RECOM, which aim to document the facts of the conflicts and create a regional culture of remembrance, are more important than ever-but also increasingly marginalized or ignored by political elites.

Despite these significant challenges, the Western Balkans is not without hope. The continued work of civil society actors, victim associations, journalists, and independent researchers reflects a resilience and commitment to truth, justice, and reconciliation that must not be overlooked. Initiatives such as the RECOM Reconciliation Network demonstrate the enduring potential of regional, victim-centered approaches to truth-telling and memory-building. Similarly, frameworks like the Regional Cooperation Council and the Berlin Process, though not explicitly reconciliation, focused-offer practical platforms for building regional trust through economic interdependence, mobility, and policy alignment.

It is essential, however, that these regional frameworks do not become purely technocratic exercises divorced from the political and emotional realities of post-conflict societies. Peace and reconciliation cannot be achieved solely through infrastructure projects or economic cooperation; they require a genuine engagement with the past, an acknowledgment of suffering, and a commitment to justice. The political climate in Europe, shaped increasingly by right-wing populism, poses a serious threat to these normative commitments. Without a renewed effort to reaffirm democratic values and human rights, both within the EU and in its external engagements - the prospects for meaningful reconciliation in the Balkans will remain constrained.

In light of these findings, several key recommendations emerge. First, international actors, particularly the European Union, must reassert their

normative leadership and confront internal contradictions that weaken their external influence.

This means actively challenging revisionist narratives and ensuring that support for transitional justice and reconciliation remains consistent, even in the face of political backlash. Second, regional initiatives must be empowered and sufficiently funded to carry out their mandates, with a greater focus on participatory dialogue and the inclusion of marginalized voices. Third, domestic political actors in the Western Balkans must be held accountable for inciting nationalist rhetoric and obstructing reconciliation processes. This requires both international pressure and domestic civic mobilization.

Although years have passed since the end of armed conflicts, reconciliation in the Western Balkans remains far from complete. Many old wounds are still open, and deeply entrenched divisive narratives, along with the spread of disinformation, continue to pose serious obstacles to meaningful reconciliation. Education and history teaching have the potential to serve as powerful tools for healing and understanding; however, they have thus far failed to fulfill this role. Youth play a particularly important role in reconciliation, as conflicts and unresolved tensions are often passed from one generation to the next. While the European Union emphasizes functional cooperation among Western Balkan countries, this approach alone is insufficient to foster genuine reconciliation and mutual trust. These insights were presented by Stormy-Annika Mildner and Tina Bories in the Aspen Institute's 2023 report *Reconciliation in the Western Balkans*.

Ultimately, peace and security in the Western Balkans cannot be sustained through political declarations alone. They require a collective and long-term commitment to truth, accountability, and justice-principles that are increasingly under threat in today's political climate. As Europe navigates its own ideological crises, it must not abandon the unfinished business of reconciliation in its immediate neighborhood. The Western Balkans, geographically and historically a part of Europe, deserves a future rooted not in fear and division, but in shared memory, mutual recognition, and lasting peace.

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