

OPEN LETTER TO THE EUROPEAN UNION from the CITIZENS OF THE BALKAN REGION

Dear representatives of the European Union,

The citizens of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia were recently presented with the EU Strategy for the so-called Western Balkans. In the words of the drafters this presents “a historic window of opportunity to firmly and unequivocally bind their future to the European Union”. While we welcome engagement that would help us to restore democracies in our countries and provide real influence and power to the citizens of this region, we wish to express our concerns with the Strategy itself as it offers nothing but a favourable climate for private businesses, securitization and militarization of our borders and countries, and a cheap sell-out of our natural resources.

Much like the unfortunate direction most of the countries in the region took in the 90-ies (conflicts war and destruction), this development is neither inevitable or natural – it is an ideologically driven process of economic, political, and social transformation of our societies, and we have a generational responsibility not to be silent about it.

We understand that for the long period now you have been dealing and negotiating with our political elites – the so-called elected representatives of the citizens and peoples in the region. In your dealing with them you have been led to believe that the vision in the Strategy is indeed a commonly shared vision among the citizens of the region. However, these “representatives” (the tycoons and oligarchs, the construction mafia, the war-profiteers, and war-mongers) have long ago lost their touch with the constituencies and have never had anything but their personal, short-term profit as a guiding star. The political, economic and social well-being of this region and people who live in it has never been on their agenda. Despite the tangible proof of that, visible for decades, the European Union has continuously and unequivocally chosen to work with them as long as the economic interests of the EU were not put at risk.

Our countries indeed find themselves in a situation referred to by the Strategy as “a generational choice”, but we believe that the generational choice we stand in front is not simply about joining the European Union or not. It is a choice whether this region will entirely succumb to the neoliberal ideology that has been destroying our region for almost three decades now. The Strategy itself understands the progress of this region entirely through a false dichotomy between functional and healthy economy and social and economic rights of the people. What the Strategy tells us is that economic progress can

only happen if the markets are deregulated and liberated from state-imposed restrictions, such as taxes, that ultimately fund whatever little of social rights are left in our countries. A Strategy that blindly looks at the deregulation of the market, privatization and privileging of foreign investments over socio-economic development, justice and equality – all the things we consider to be decisive for the well-being of our societies - is not a Strategy we consider “a historic window of opportunity”!

Considering that bigger part of the region has gone through violent conflicts, resulting in destruction of not only the infrastructure but the societal fabric as well, addressing the consequences of those conflicts should be a top priority to the European Union. And indeed, the Strategy identifies *Reconciliation, good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation* as one of its flagship initiatives but fails to demonstrate that the EU understands reconciliation as an aim in itself. Instead, the Strategy subjugates it to the creation of “economic opportunities”. In other words, “reconciliation” is for the Strategy a means to an end - a market economy that is not burdened by the past but liberated by the profit. For us on the other hand, reconciliation is not a matter of “achievement” but rather a result of cumulative efforts to address social, political, and economic consequences of the war. In those efforts, economic and social justice, reinforced by comprehensive and gender sensitive reparations program for the harms suffered, as part of the overall economic recovery of our countries, take a central space. Right to quality and affordable healthcare, decent employment, social assistance, housing, education, clean water, and so forth, are all preconditions for just and equal societies and must therefore be a major preoccupation in the countries of the region. By privileging profit-making over right to economic and social justice the Strategy contributes to destabilization of this region and undermines any ongoing processes of peace.

The current state of our countries indeed demands structural reforms: political, economic and social. We believe there is a broad societal consensus on that. At the same time, contrary to what the political elites are telling you, there is no consensus on how those changes are to be delivered. This is no different than the lack of consensus on the direction and future of the EU, as seen in the ongoing debates within the EU and its member states. The reforms that are so happily and unquestionably proposed and enforced in our countries, are in fact the very reforms that are being questioned within the EU countries themselves. As it stands now, the impoverished, disenfranchised and disempowered citizens of our countries, many of whom are still dealing with the consequences of the war, are faced with irreversible, neoliberal post-conflict restructuring to detriment of their human rights, in particular social and economic rights. Rather than reducing the fundamental parts of the public sector it would be more equitable to conduct budget trade-offs through comparing the impact of reducing budget deficits with the impact of strengthening investments in human capacities and societal needs on economic growth, poverty reduction and gender equality.

Contrary to the Strategy's underlining that the membership in the EU is "a choice" – the fact is that it has been a long time since this region has had a real choice and long time ago since the citizens (and not the political elites) have had a voice to express that choice!

So, we would like to take this opportunity to present to you OUR choices:

- Instead of judging the health of our economies and societies through market competitiveness **our choice is** to judge it through its successes or failures to provide adequate, decent and sustainable livelihoods for its citizens.
- Instead of putting blind trust into small and mid-sized enterprises as a solution to growing unemployment and deterioration of our economic and social rights **our choice** are unionized decent jobs with decent pay, fair and equal treatment at work and access to social protection.
- Instead of focusing on vocational trainings which insists on training people to remain in low-paid positions, and doubling the money for Erasmus+ that will only lead to more of our brightest students leaving the region and never looking back, **our choice is** a quality education, equally accessible and affordable to all. Instead of being forced to continuously crowd-fund for the sick who cannot afford the adequate health care within the country, **our choice is** a quality health system, equally accessible and affordable to all. This requires increased investments in the public sector and more money put into the educational and health infrastructure so that our youth have an impetus to stay.
- Instead of building freeways that will be of greater use to corporations and free market economy than to the ordinary citizens who, while paying off the debts for the freeways' construction, will not be able to afford to use them, **our choice is** construction of a quality infrastructure and roads inside the countries that will enable everyone to access and enjoy their socio-economic rights (e.g. functional roads and transportation for people who live in remote areas to enable them to reach the medical facilities, educational and other institutions). **Our choice** is tax politics that will lay the ground for redistribution of wealth inside the countries and pull our societies out of the debt bondage we rapidly are falling into.
- A region that has suffered immensely during the 90-ies, and continues to suffer from the consequences of those wars, should not be forced into forgetting our own experiences of forced displacement and seeking refuge through securitization of our immigration policies, militarization of our borders and an increase in numbers of restrictive measure, all to come to the defense of the fortress-Europe. **Our choice are** societies built on solidarity, within and across the borders!

- Instead of purely focusing on energy gains from tapping into the Balkan natural resources and irrevocably destroying the most important hotspot for European biodiversity, as well as depleting our vital resources such as water, **our choice** is to build societies that are ecologically and environmentally sustainable, and whose natural resources and treasures are used as a potential for a sustainable socio-economic development that will be available to our future generations.

These are our choices. This is how we see our societies thrive. We do not relinquish our responsibility to work for such a future. If, however, the European Union keeps using the accession process to make our countries serve the economic and geopolitical interests of the EU core, we shall hold the European Union as responsible for the destruction of our societies as the national corrupt political elites with whom EU officials shake hands. European Union that advances economic interests of only the elite of the core of Europe, at the detriment of EU nationals and others, has little to offer to both those already inside and those still outside.

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UNDERSIGNED in alphabetical order:

Individuals

1. Adi Isaković
2. Adisa Likić
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6. Aleksandra Elčić Čelanović
7. Alen Crnogorčević
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10. Ana Miškovska Kajevska
11. Anđa S. Ilić
12. Anes Podić
13. Anida Sokol
14. Antonio Mihajlov
15. Asim Mujkić
16. Azra Brkić

17. Bećir Habibović
18. Belma Bećirbašić
19. Bojana Đokanović
20. Bojana Matić, stanovnica Balkana
21. Bojana Mumin
22. Boris Miškić
23. Boro Kontić
24. Branko Čulibrk
25. Čedomir Mlinarević
26. Damir Arsenijević
27. Damir Porobić
28. Dario Borčak
29. Dragan Golubović
30. Dragica Mlinarević
31. Edin Begeta
32. Eldin Habibović
33. Elmaja Bavčić
34. Ena Bavčić
35. Eroll Bilibani
36. Ervina Dabižinović
37. Esma Drkenda
38. Fadila Selak Radmilović
39. Franjo Šarčević
40. Goran Bubalo
41. Goran Zorić
42. Gorana Mlinarević
43. Hafiza Avdić
44. Hajra Čatić
45. Hava Mujkić
46. Helena Mandić
47. Ibrahim Brkić
48. Ibrahim Spahić
49. Ifeta Česir-Škoro
50. Igor Kamočaji
51. Irina Pockova
52. Ivana Dračo
53. Jakov Čaušević
54. Jasenko Osmanagić
55. Jasmin Bradić
56. Jasmina Čaušević
57. Jasmina Husanović
58. Jasminka Drino Kirilić
59. Jelena Vasiljević
60. Jusuf Makarević
61. Lejla Efendić
62. Lejla Hadžiahmić
63. Lejla Huremović
64. Lepa Mladenović
65. Linda Gusia

66. Ljulijeta Goranci Brkić
67. Ljupka Kovačević
68. Marina Veličković
69. Memnuna Zvizdić
70. Merima Dervišić
71. Mevlija Mehmedović
72. Mevludih Rahmanović
73. Milica Plavšić
74. Mirha Pojskić
75. Mirhada Valentić
76. Muhamed Okanović
77. Nejra Čengić
78. Nela Porobić Isaković
79. Nenad Porobić
80. Nermina Mujagić
81. Nermina Trbonja
82. Nervina Habibović
83. Nidžara Ahmetašević
84. Nura Begović
85. Paša Smajić
86. Paula Petričević
87. Ramiz Čatibušić
88. Sandra Avrosievska,
89. Sandra Zlotrg
90. Sanela Bašić
91. Sanja Vrzić
92. Seida Sarić
93. Selma Asotić
94. Selma Spahić
95. Semir Mehadžić
96. Slavo Kukić
97. Snežana Šešlija
98. Sonja Lokar
99. Sutka Mujagić
100. Svjetlana Nedimović
101. Tamara Cvetković
102. Tamara Zablocki
103. Tanja Grabovac
104. Tanja Miletić Oručević
105. Vahidin Omanović
106. Zilka Spahić Šiljak
107. Zlatica Gruhonjić
108. Zoran Mlinarević
109. Zoran Petrovski

Organizations

1. Anima - Centar za žensko i mirovno obrazovanje, Kotor
2. Centar za demokratiju i tranzicionu pravdu (CDTP)

3. Centar za edukaciju i istraživanje "Nahla"
4. Centar za izgradnju mira
5. Centar za mlade KVART
6. Centar za političke studije u Sarajevu
7. Centar za razvoj civilnog društva
8. Centar za razvoj zajednica ToPeer Doboj
9. Centar za žene žrtve rata ROSA
10. Domine, organizacija za promicanje ženskih prava
11. Feministički anti-militaristički kolektiv
12. Fondacija CURE
13. Fondacija za kreativni razvoj
14. Helsinški parlament građana Banja Luke
15. IN Fondacija
16. Inicijativa građanki/Mostar
17. Jedan grad jedna borba
18. Kolektiv.BA - inicijativa za iskustveno učenje
19. Leftist movement "Solidarity" Macedonia
20. Međunarodni centar za djecu i omladinu "Fortis"
21. Međunarodni centar za mir
22. Nansen Dialogue Centre Prijedor
23. Nansen Dialogue Centre Sarajevo
24. ORC Tuzla
25. Pokret građana Gračanice
26. Politička organizacija Udar ljevice
27. Post-Conflict Research Center (PCRC) | Centar za postkonfliktna istraživanja (CPI)
28. Prava za sve
29. Savez za povratka izbjeglih i raseljenih Bosanske Posavine
30. TPO Fondacija
31. U.G. Budućnost Modriča
32. U.G. Kuća mira
33. U.G. Oštra Nula
34. U.G. SEKA Goražde
35. U.G. Žene Srebrenice Tuzla
36. Udruženja za dijalog u porodici i društvu "Mali koraci"
37. Udruženje "Orhideja" Stolac
38. Udruženje "Sara-Srebrenica"
39. Udruženje "Naš glas" Tuzla
40. Udruženje „Dijakom“ Sanski Most
41. Udruženje „HO HORIZONTI“ Tuzla
42. Udruženje „Novi put“ Mostar
43. Udruženje „Žena“ Mostar
44. Udruženje Duga
45. Udruženje Glas žene Bihać
46. Udruženje građana Eko akcija
47. Udruženje građana Omladinski centar Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje
48. Udruženje građanki Grahovo
49. Udruženje HALO
50. Udruženje oboljelih od šećerne bolesti općine Bužim

51. Udruženje Prijedorčanki Izvor
52. Udruženje Snaga žene Tuzla
53. Udruženje Zgrade
54. Udruženje žena "Li-Woman"
55. Udruženje žena Jadar, Konjević Polje
56. Udruženje žena Most Višegrad
57. Udruženje žena Priroda Bratunac
58. Udruženje žena Sehara
59. Udruženje žena Vive žene
60. Udruženje Žene sa Une
61. Udruženje Žene ženama
62. Žene za Žene International Sarajevo
63. Ženska mreža Hrvatske