



Interviews

[EWB Interview] Schmidt: EU integration process is always the art of compromise

by Sofija Popović 26. 10. 2023.

“Europeanisation meets democracy from below: The Western Balkans on the search for new European and democratic Momentum (WB2EU)” project was launched in 2020. The idea of three-years project was to gather a network consists of 17 think-tanks, do-tanks, higher education institutes and policy centres from the countries that will be most decisive for the enlargement process in the upcoming years.

Some of the aims of the projects was to strengthen pro-European and pro-democratic momentum in the Western Balkans, support the democratic reform process and progressive democratic changes from below, create a sustainable network able to accompany and support Europeanisation and democracy, as well as to foster cooperation between the networks

and relevant EU institutions and stakeholders...

During the three years network published 45 policy briefs, multiple op-eds and interviews, gathered a new generation of 'young influentials' dedicated to enlargement, democratisation, well connected to national and EU decision-makers. The closing event of the project was held on 9 October in Vienna. About the results of the projects, the future of EU enlargement on the Western Balkans we spoke with **Paul Schmidt**, Secretary-General of the Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖgfE) – coordinator of WB2EU project.

European Western Balkans: In the time when WB2EU project was launched there was not much room for optimism when it comes to enlargement. The French No to opening the negotiation with North Macedonia and Albania created a new vacuum in the EU and in the region. In the same time WB region faced rooted structural problems with the states and societies being captured by dominant elites... How much has the situation changed today?

Paul Schmidt: The situation has changed completely. Reform and enlargement are back on the table and high up on the political agenda. The Russian war against Ukraine has put the world upside down and is a historic turning point for European integration.

It is a window of opportunity to make it right, but it is also a window that may not stay open for long. It will take political strength and real commitment to make the Union ready for enlargement and the candidate countries fit to join. There will be no political shortcuts to this process, but where there is a will, there is always a way.

EWB: How do you describe the results of the WB2EU projects? What are the main achievements?

PS: We have all been pushing for a new momentum for EU-reform and enlargement. But to be honest, without the Russian aggression against Ukraine it might have been a mission impossible to reenergize this process. Who is we? At the core of our WB2EU project lies a network of 17 policy institutes from 16 countries.

It is a very diverse group of people with different backgrounds, that has worked together, has learned from each other over the last three years and has been, is and will always be very much engaged in EU-policy making as well as public outreach and advocacy. In this period, we have organized many public debates and ideas labs with stakeholders in the different countries of the region and beyond.

We have published policy briefs on the divergent situations regarding the rule of law, social questions and democracy as well as joint op-eds on the state of enlargement and the political discussions in the countries of our network. We have supported and engaged with progressive and emancipatory forces from below – from grassroot-movements to citizens and local initiatives – that are truly European and pro-democratic.

And we have assisted youth and alternative voices and forces in the society to be heard, get connected and build their own networks. We might not have managed to completely change the world, but tried to contribute our grain of sand. At the end of the day every little bit helps and we will continue doing so.

EWB: How do you assess the target 2030, which was announced by Charles Michel as a potential date for new enlargements? Do you think that this date is realistic?

PS: It is not enough to name possible target dates for the next round of EU enlargement. The accession process is still merit based.

Dates have to be accompanied by a concrete roadmap for reforms otherwise they overshoot expectations, which then may lead to another round of undesired frustration. Setting 2030 as a target date is optimistic, but not impossible. It all depends on the political will and commitment to make real progress on this path towards a stronger EU.

EWB: In the past decade, several times we have seen that the EU was not able to fulfill its promises towards some WB countries, like North Macedonia. Do you think that EU should be cautious when promising dates?

PS: The EU should definitely be careful. I understand the reasoning behind it to push for reforms and political agreements. However, and having in mind the track record of setting dates, one could consider being more cautious.

“ *The political wind in the EU capitals can be changing and, in the end, it is the EU member states that have to decide. Moreover, keeping with a date not always depends on the side, that is making the promise.*

EWB: In an interview for EWB a year ago, you stated that there will no be enlargement without internal reform of the European Union. What should this reform look like?

PS: The EU's internal set up has to be ready for enlargement otherwise, I am convinced, it will not take place. Enlargement may have become a geopolitical imperative. However, enlargement is not only driven by foreign and security policy concerns but also entails a strong economic, financial, and social dimension. That is why the European Commission proposed reviewing all policy areas and making them ready for a bigger Union.

This is why it is paramount to include the EU candidate countries in the yearly Rule of Law Monitoring of the EU already at an early stage. Here institutional questions might be the easier exercise. But the sheer weight of a possible next enlargement, with nine countries, in particular with Ukraine currently fighting for its existence, has no comparison.

Next to the special security dimension, we should not neglect the substantial economic differences between the EU-27 and the current candidate countries; the nine potential new member states all belong to the ten poorest countries in Europe. Once tough questions of competition or the future financing of the EU are on the table, negotiations and political decisions will naturally become more complicated.

EWB: How do you assess the proposal for the EU reform presented in the so-called French-German report, published in September? Could some solutions related to the enlargement help resolving the standstill in accession negotiations of candidate countries?

SP: I think it a very valuable and interesting report that focuses on reforming the functioning of the EU prior to enlargement. In essence it proposes a set of reforms within the current set of rules as

well as outside the EU treaties.

It stresses different degrees of integration as a possible way to succeed, where the differentiation between countries would enable a varying group of core member states to move on and further deepen integration. These are interesting ideas that need to be discussed and would obviously not reduce complexity but rather enhance it. And as always the prove of the pudding is in the eating.

EWB: Last month Austrian Government sent a non-paper calling for the acceleration of EU integration of the Western Balkans. Vienna demands an action plan that would include concrete steps for the gradual integration of the countries from the region. What is your opinion on gradual/phased accession? Do you share concern that maybe some countries may become stuck in certain phases?

SP: I do understand that there is a certain amount of skepticism, but I do not share these concerns. A gradual integration may frontload benefits and thus the glass would be half full and not half empty. The objective of EU-membership would not change.

EWB: It seems that new enlargement has become a geopolitical imperative for the EU. Is there any risk that criteria like rule of law, fight against organized crime and corruption, will no longer be the main for progress on the EU path?

PS: EU-integration is always the art of compromise. However, and while the geopolitical argument is today paramount, enlargement is about more than foreign and security policies.

There can no compromise regarding the rule of law otherwise the Union risks its implosion.

The interview is published in the framework of the WB2EU project. The project aims at the establishment of a network of renowned think-tanks, do-tanks, universities, higher education institutes and policy centres from the Western Balkans, neighbouring countries and EU member states that will be most decisive for the enlargement process and Europeanisation of the region in the upcoming years. The WB2EU project is co-funded by the European Commission under its Erasmus+ Jean Monnet programme.