

Society

WB2EU: Western Balkans should use the existing window of opportunity, rule of law remains the key

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Photo: WB2EU Network/APA

VIENNA – Regional cooperation among the Western Balkan countries is crucial for their European integration process, agreed the participants of the closing event of the project “Europeanisation meets democracy from below: The Western Balkans on the search for new European and democratic Momentum” (WB2EU), held in Vienna on 9 October.

The event gathered leaders, academics, and experts from the Western Balkan countries and across Europe and served as a platform for discussing the critical role of regional cooperation among the Western Balkan countries in their journey towards European integration.

Secretary General of the Austrian Society for European Politics and the Project Leader for the WB2EU project **Paul Schmidt** set the stage by highlighting the importance of the three-year project and the collaboration among 17 policy and university institutes from 16 different countries.

Schmidt said that European enlargement had transitioned from a technical approach to a politically driven exercise. He also emphasized three core topics: the rule of law, the social dimension of integration, and democratization from below. Schmidt stressed the common European values shared by the region and the need to act swiftly, given the limited

window of opportunity.

“We don’t have a common language. We have many different languages. We don’t have a common religion, but many different religions, but we do have common European values”, said Schmidt.

Schmidt underlined that enlargement was not just about engaging with political elites but engaging with the people, their dreams, and their daily lives. He concluded by emphasizing the importance of ownership and political will in EU capitals, crucial for the success of this ambitious project.

“There’s a window of opportunity, but the window will not be open for many years to come. So, we have to use this time and seize this opportunity now to make progress. There are political winds of change that could move the political landscape in a direction, which would make it more difficult to make progress in terms of accession and negotiating with new and future members”, explained Schmidt.



Paul Schmidt; Photo: WB2EU Network/APA

Austrian Minister of Justice **Alma Zadić** reflected on what it means to be European – a commitment to peace, solidarity, the rule of law, and democracy.

She acknowledged that European integration had returned to the agenda after years of stagnation and emphasized that it was not merely a matter of geopolitics but the essence of a united Europe.

“The road is long, we know that, but the future of the Western Balkans lies in the European Union. And we should pave those roads to enable visible results in integration quickly, because the people in the Western Balkans, they need to see that progress is there, and they need to see that change is possible”, said Zadić.

Zadić acknowledged the challenges of waning trust in both the EU and national politics and called for delivering on promises and ensuring political leaders in the Western Balkans did the same. She believed that

the youth and civil society could drive change and expressed her support for fostering the rule of law in the Western Balkan countries.



Alma Zadic; Photo: WB2EU Network/APA

Former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of European Affairs of Montenegro **Jovana Marović** called for a reconsideration of the EU's approach to democracy in the Western Balkans. She questioned the efficacy of various EU strategies and emphasized the importance of the rule of law in EU conditionality.

"The fundamentals are really fundamentals. Rule of law is the most important part of the European integration process and the EU conditionality ", said Marović.

Marović believes that the EU's success depended on strengthening democracy at all levels. She argued that the Western Balkans represented the last chance for the EU not to fail as a political project.

"The future of the European Union, and the answer to the question of why the European Union has to be bigger, is actually that all processes are really connected, and it is really important to focus on all the issues and all the countries where the democracy is struggling ", explained Marović.

Programme Director of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights in Serbia **Sofija Todorović** highlighted the crucial role of peace in any progress. She criticized the lack of genuine support for the EU and expressed concerns about the economic cooperation model presented as a solution. Todorović stressed that peace should be a guiding principle and called for leaders to reflect this in their actions.

"We cannot talk about trade without peace. We cannot talk about democratic progress without peace. We cannot discuss any other issue that can increase the quality of daily life of people. Because when we are in the conflict people only want peace", said Todorović.

Professor at the New Bulgarian University and representative of the

WB2EU Network **Anna Krasteva** discussed the role of nationalism and populism in the current political landscape. She drew attention to the need for authority in such times, emphasizing the importance of addressing the deep-seated issues within the region.

Moreover, Head of Representation of the European Commission in Austria **Martin Selmayr** emphasized the enduring success of EU enlargement. He pointed out that the enthusiasm for this project remains, with 10 countries currently knocking at the EU's door.

Selmayr also acknowledged moments of frustration and the need for a realistic approach. He highlighted the new momentum and the positive implications for the EU and the candidate countries, emphasizing that the core purpose of the EU is to ensure peace and stability among its Member States.

"We cannot just enlarge the European Union for the sake of enlargement. It must lead to a strengthening of the European Union", concluded Selmayr.

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