

Executive Summary

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How to win the fight for democracy in the Western Balkan? The impact of the super-election year 2024

Panel Discussion in cooperation with the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, Centre for Southeast European Studies, and European Fund for the Balkans.

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Takeaways:

- The year 2024, being a super-election year, is a crucial moment for assessing the resilience of democracy around the globe and particularly in the Western Balkans, a region that is already struggling with democratic backsliding
- The influence of a number of external actors in the Western Balkans highlights a complex interplay between the countries seeking stability and keeping democratic governance and integrity.
- The European Union is positioned as a key actor in encouraging democratic reforms within the Western Balkans. However, the EU must address the growing anti-democratic trends both within its borders and in candidate countries, underlining the importance of credibility and consistent support for democratic initiatives of the region.
- Identifying and then working on effective strategies to combat democratic backsliding in the region is crucial. Engagement with civil society and pro-democracy movements, such as the feminist movement, are some of the best ways to foster a democratic environment in the Western Balkans.
- Populist movements are emerging as a significant global threat to democratic governance, challenging liberal political structures and weakening institutions built on democratic principles.

Keywords:

Western Balkan, democracy, EU, super-election year, autocratic regimes, populist movements, democratic initiatives

Wichtigste Erkenntnisse:

- Das Jahr 2024 ist als Superwahljahr ein entscheidender Zeitpunkt, um die Widerstandsfähigkeit der Demokratie auf der ganzen Welt und insbesondere auf dem Westbalkan zu bewerten, einer Region, die bereits mit demokratischen Rückschritten zu kämpfen hat.
- Der Einfluss einer Reihe externer Akteure auf dem Westbalkan verdeutlicht das komplexe Zusammenspiel zwischen den Ländern, die Stabilität anstreben und die demokratische Regierungsführung und Integrität bewahren wollen.
- Die Europäische Union ist ein wichtiger Akteur bei der Förderung demokratischer Reformen auf dem Westbalkan. Die EU muss sich jedoch mit den wachsenden antidemokratischen Tendenzen sowohl innerhalb ihrer Grenzen als auch in den Kandidatenländern auseinandersetzen, was die Bedeutung von Glaubwürdigkeit und konsequenter Unterstützung für demokratische Initiativen in der Region unterstreicht.
- Es ist von entscheidender Bedeutung, wirksame Strategien zur Bekämpfung des demokratischen Rückschritts in der Region zu ermitteln und dann zu erarbeiten. Die Zusammenarbeit mit der Zivilgesellschaft und pro-demokratischen Bewegungen, wie der Frauenbewegung, ist eine der besten Möglichkeiten, ein demokratisches Umfeld in den Westbalkanländern zu fördern.
- Populistische Bewegungen entwickeln sich zu einer bedeutenden globalen Bedrohung für die demokratische Staatsführung, indem sie liberale politische Strukturen in Frage stellen und die auf demokratischen Grundsätzen aufgebauten Institutionen schwächen.

Introduction

The year 2024 is now often regarded as the 'super election year', and in this year, the Western Balkans stand at a decisive crossroads, with the internal situation also reflecting the global tensions between the principles of democracy and the rising forces of autocratic governance and regimes. As everyone's eyes are focusing on this super-election year, when major electoral events such as the elections in the European Parliament and the United States will unravel and where many far-right actors might come to power, the fragility of democratic governance and democracy itself has never been more clear. The current period of political introspection and the need for action is also particularly significant for the Western Balkans, a region that is historically known as swinging between the aspirations of democratic integration and the reality of autocratic structures.

The Austrian Institute for International Affairs (OIIP), in a forward-looking discussion held in Vienna, delved into the intricacies of this decisive year of 2024.

The discussion delved around "The Fight for Democracy in the Western Balkans Amid the Super-Election Year" and aimed to unravel this year's implications for the region and the broader pursuit of democratic resilience. It assessed the current state of democracy within the Western Balkans and discussed some solutions for strengthening democratic institutions and norms within the region, to win this fight for democracy. The dialogue was underscored by a critical examination of the multifaceted challenges facing democracy in the Western Balkans, ranging from foreign influence and the tricky stability promised by autocratic regimes to the European Union enlargement fatigue and its impact on democratic aspirations. Furthermore, it was a platform for exploring the potential of supporting democratic initiatives, grassroots movements and civic engagement as critical components of democratic strengthening. It reiterated the broader concerns about the retreat of liberal values on the international stage and made it clear that we need to be aware of the future possibilities as that it might not all be fine as this year can have repercussions not only for the Western Balkans but for wider Europe, NATO as an alliance and more.

Amidst these discussions, the speakers sought to come up with a path forward, advocating for robust support for democracy while incorporating the unique challenges and opportunities in the Western Balkans. Ultimately, through the discussion, it became evident that 2024 serves as a crucial moment

that reflects the struggles of democracies worldwide, encapsulating the tensions between the ideas of democratic governance and the challenges navigating in a world increasingly susceptible to autocratic leadership. It is a year which allows us to be much more sober about what can and should be done. This event was a platform for a crucial dialogue that served as a step towards a better understanding of the complex dynamics at play in the Western Balkans, and it aimed to reinforce the commitment to democracy in the region and beyond.

The Super-Election Year and Its Meaning for the Western Balkans

This year of 2024 stands out not only due to the sheer number of pivotal elections that can highly impact the EU, NATO and the Western Balkans but also for the potential ramifications these elections can hold for democratic governance and democracy itself. More than half of the world's adult population will have the chance to exercise their voting rights this year, and with the excitement of elections also come concerns of potential democratic backsliding coming with these elections (Tenove and Tworek, 2022). The phrase "We will know whether democracy lives or dies by the end of 2024," as highlighted by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa, captures the existential weight this year holds (Flanders, 2023). It clearly underscores the heightened carefulness and anticipation placed upon these elections as a test for the 'health' of democratic institutions both within and beyond the region. In the Western Balkans, a region often regarded as a crossroads between their rife internal challenges with democracy and its aspirations for EU membership, the super-election year will pose a distinctive set of challenges.

In the Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), democratic resilience is constantly tested against autocratic governance trends and tendencies. Looking at the recent measures, Serbia and Albania can now be seen as electoral autocracies, while Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina can be regarded as very weak electoral democracies. Furthermore, the authors at BiEpag report that the regime in the Republika Srpska can be regarded as authoritarian (Kapidzic, Djolai and Kmezic, 2023). Therefore, the outcomes of the super-election year could further endanger the region's democratic health.

The significance of this year for the region is multifaceted. First of all, it represents an opportunity for a reassessment or alteration of the region's democratic trajectory. Elections outside the region, such as those in the US and EU, can also highly impact the political climate of the WB, as shifts in priorities, policies and alliances emanating from these elections can alter the democratic support mechanisms and investment strategies that are very much needed for the region's reform efforts. Florian Bieber, a Professor of Southeast European History and Politics at the University of Graz and Director of the Centre for Southeast European Studies, also noted that it is very likely that Trump might get reelected, which can have serious consequences for EU enlargement for Ukraine and for the world in general. Especially as Trump's second presidency will probably not be as moderate as the first one, now that there are barely any moderate Republicans to hold him back from even dismantling institutions.

Furthermore, the European Union's elections can also change the trajectory of democracy in Europe, with the far-right parties rising across the continent and gaining support. This can especially impact the Western Balkans as the EU is a major investor in the reforms in the region, with seven hundred million euros invested just between 2014 and 2020, and a further six billion are planned to support the Western Balkans with reforms (Lega, 2024). Moreover, the super-election year might amplify the challenges and also opportunities for democratic consolidation of the region, as external validation and encouragement could play a significant role in strengthening democratic institutions and the rule of law.

However, this year's risks are considerable. There is a potential for increased geopolitical 'scramble for power', as the contentious geopolitical antagonism in the regions could exacerbate vulnerabilities. There are threats of tensions heightening in the region, and some actors possibly use the moment of focus on elections or the results to act for their own gain. So, there will be people who will try to seize the moment if they think they can get away with it because there are many who don't like the status quo, and they live with it because they know the price is too high. But when they believe the price gets to be low enough, they will act. So, these windows of opportunity for autocrats and those who want to use force to create situations are dangerous, so we need to be expectant and careful. It is something we learned from February 2022. The WB's strategic significance as a 'buffer' between East and West and the 'soft belly' of Europe also means that these elections can either strengthen democracy or embolden autocratic tendencies.

In conclusion, the super-election year of 2024 is a prism through which the complex interplay of global elections and regional democratic processes in the Western Balkans can be scrutinized. We can see this year as a shining light towards progress but also a source of uncertainty. Therefore, understanding the implications of this year is crucial for all invested in the democratic future of the region, highlighting the need for engagement and vigilance in the face of unfolding electoral outcomes.

Influence of Foreign Actors and the Autocratic Promise of Stability

The discourse stemming from the event reveals the critical narrative surrounding the influence of foreign actors in the Western Balkans. This narrative offers a nuanced perspective on the external pressures shaping the journey towards democratic governance. The region has a complex political landscape, and the influence of foreign actors and the temptation and promises of autocratic stability are increasingly significant. Western Balkans are entangled in a geopolitical struggle for influence that transcends economic interests or political alignments. This struggle, as highlighted during the discussion, is clearly represented by the engagements of countries such as Russia and China, both countries with a model of governance that diverges from the democratic ideals.

The influence of foreign actors in the region is not a new phenomenon. However, today, countries like Russia and China have become increasingly assertive in their influence in the Western Balkans. They offer political support, economic incentives, and even a model of governance that contrasts quite distinctly from the liberal democratic ideals shared by the West.

Russia's entanglement in the region has often been characterised by its efforts to undermine EU integration processes and NATO expansion, leveraging cultural, historical and religious ties to the region and exploiting divisions and tensions within the region to extend and further its influence (McBride, 2022).

Furthermore, China approaches the region particularly through strategic economic investment, for example, in line with the Belt and Road initiative, offering substantial financial resources without demanding numerous reforms required by Western institutions. China offers financial investments in crucial sectors such as infrastructure and energy, but its involvement can be seen beyond economic

interactions as well (Shopov, 2022). While these investments might be beneficial for the region in terms of infrastructural development, they can also carry a suggestion that autocratic stability is a viable alternative to the often complicated and challenging process of democratization of the region. In the end, we should not over- or underemphasize China, as it invested economically, but it did not really engage directly with the political realm, so its strategy is not as offensive as Russia's. Moreover, China's involvement is not simply due to Chinese efforts, as, for example, autocratic leaders are known to align with other autocratic leaders, which explains Serbia's alignment with China. In this case, local actors and autocratic leaders play a significant role in attracting Chinese investment and then enforcing autocratic leadership in the state. Furthermore, as noted during the discussions, China and Serbia connect through a memory culture in terms of joint victimization by NATO and by the West. There are even commemorations of the bombing of the Chinese embassy and the NATO bombing of Serbia. So, this narrative is created of the West as a kind of common enemy.

These external influences pose a dilemma for the region. From one side, the promise of stability and economic investment is tempting, especially for a region that is struggling with economic challenges and political instability. However, on the other side, the embrace of autocratic leadership poses a threat to the democratic steps already made and stalls the progress towards European integration. The trade between external support for immediate gains versus the long-term implications of democratic governance and the rule of law is a central concern.

The stability narrative is often used to justify autocratic practices, with claims that powerful leadership is needed to navigate the complex post-conflict environment and economic development. This narrative is especially risky for the Western Balkans, where the public of almost all the countries still ranks the quality of life higher than democracy, and the promise of stability might seem like a path towards a higher quality of life (Between East and West Democracy, Disinformation and Geopolitics in Central and Southeastern Europe, 2021). However, this narrative disregards the effects of autocratic practices on the rule of law, civil liberties, and democratic participation. The discussion clearly illustrated how local leaders, swayed by external influences, then turn toward authoritarianism under the mask of ensuring stability and security for the region.

However, it is not just these actors that look at the region through geopolitics, but as Marina Vulovic, Researcher and Lecturer at the University of Potsdam, Visiting Fellow at the SWP Berlin, notes that

also the Western gaze on the region is through the lance of geopolitical eyes, which then influences the perception of the region as well as the involvement of foreign actors. Through this lens, the role of external actors is sometimes overemphasized, especially since February 2022, the role of Russia has been overemphasized while China was a bit forgotten. Furthermore, if the region is looked at through a geopolitical lens, this affects democracy and the rule of law, which sometimes get thrown out of the priority list. This could leave us wondering whether the West has forgotten about China and failed to make important investments, where China then filled the gap. However, Marina Vulovic underlines that the West promotes the rule of law and uses positive investment and, therefore, uses investments differently than China. The dialogue at the event emphasized the need for a strategic response to these influences, emphasizing the EU as an actor that can counter autocratic models and support the Western Balkans on their democratic path.

In conclusion, looking back at the discussion, it becomes evident the influence of foreign actors and the autocratic promise of stability both present a complex challenge for the Western Balkans. The region's responses to these challenges will have profound, lasting implications for the region's future trajectory.

EU Enlargement and Commitment

The EU enlargement and EU commitment to the Western Balkans was also a central point of deliberation, reflecting on the whole trajectory of EU integration processes and the current challenges facing EU enlargement in the Western Balkans that underscore the need for a renewed or, better said more solid commitment. The discussion underscored that the EU enlargement could be a pivotal step and anchor for democratic values, reforms and the promise of a shared future within the European family.

A central theme emerging from the discussion was the juncture at which the Western Balkans find themselves vis-à-vis the EU's enlargement agenda. Speakers discussed the region's progress, setbacks, and the position between aspiration and reality. Within the integration processes, there were moments of major advancement and stagnation, which can be seen as a reflection of both the internal

dynamics within the Western Balkan region as well as the evolving processes and priorities within the European Union.

The notion of "commitment" was raised, bringing to light questions about the consistency of the EU's engagement with the region, the clarity of its enlargement criteria and whether the EU keeps its commitment and acts on its promises. This commitment, as discussed by the panellists, should entail a balance between conditionality and encouragement and while upholding democratic standards also offering tangible support and realistic expectations for reforms. Therefore, while commitment is crucial, it goes hand in hand with conditionality; as Florian Bieber explains, enlargement and geopolitics should not shortcut democracy, and especially it should not reward autocracy. Without keeping internal values and standards, the European Union also becomes vulnerable to the domestic threats of the far right.

However, as Corina Stratulat, an Associate Director and Head of the Programme, EPC – European Politics and Institutions, remarks, the relationship of the EU with the Western Balkans is in a complicated place. First of all, even the whole narrative of the EU on democracy in the Western Balkans is a bit problematic, as democracy is talked about as a prize or a trophy, with a set of very clear 'qualifications'. But democracy should not be seen as a goal, but as a means to the end. Corina also makes a clever comparison of democracy with a sport and explains that in this sport, we need to participate constantly; it requires everyday practice, adaptability, and flexibility to new challenges and conditions. And the EU sometimes comes short when we look at flexibility, as it is unwilling to change and does not work enough on its own structural problems. And if you do not work on yourself constantly, if you are full of complacency and arrogance, you cannot inspire others to follow you, as you do not lead by example. EU needs to be a shining example if it wants to attract others. Furthermore, the West thinks it has a monopoly over what democracy means and judges everyone else by how well or how bad they're doing democratically. And then the West becomes blind to its own limitations and problems. Furthermore, the EU has to be credible in its engagements and needs to keep the promises it makes. Especially as the countries in the Western Balkans will not have an incentive to do all the hard work to change if the EU is not a credible partner with transformative leverage.

One of the promises of the EU to the Western Balkans is further large financial investments. In November last year, the European Commission announced a new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans region in order to bring the region closer and offer some benefits and economic support (European Commission, 2023). While this is quite a large sum of money, the moderator, Vedran Dzihic, wondered whether this money could be enough of an incentive to secure compliance with democracy and democratic governance standards. Richard Grieveson, the Deputy Director at the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, then explained that the money is a part of the solution, as inflow from the EU and direct investment play a huge role. Especially as, for example, in 2008, the EU, due to its financial crisis, turned inwards and was not investing enough in the Western Balkans, and it was then that China started to step in and fill this capital gap through infrastructural investments, which then led to a geoeconomic competition.

The EU remains the primary investor and trading partner in the region, yet there's a consensus that financial investment alone is insufficient for transformative economic impact without comprehensive reforms and credibility in the enlargement process. The current economic environment, marked by post-pandemic recovery and inflation shocks, presents a challenging backdrop for reforms, emphasizing the need for the EU to enhance its role and financial support for the Western Balkans to facilitate real change.

Furthermore, the discussions critically examined the impact of external factors on the EU enlargement process, geopolitical shifts, and internal debates within the EU regarding its capacity and willingness to accept new members, especially as these factors also impact the perceptions and expectations on both sides.

Yet, amidst these challenges, the spirit of the conversation also captured a sense of optimism and a call to action. The discussion called for revitalized EU support that is adaptive, transparent, and grounded in a genuine partnership. The emphasis was on the transformative power of the EU's integration process, not only as a path to economic growth but also as a source of hope for countries striving towards democratic governance, the rule of law, and the respect of human rights. The dialogue on EU enlargement, therefore, called for a renewed commitment from the EU in order to facilitate the integration process.

As concluded, the promise of EU membership remains one of the most powerful tools for the promotion and formation of democratic reforms, but it is crucial that this promise is backed by tangible support, credible accession prospects, and for the EU to act as a shining example for what it promotes.

Support for Democratic Initiatives

The discourse on the need for support for Democratic Initiatives in the region also highlighted a need for multifaceted support for mechanisms that would safeguard and promote democracy in the region. The discussions shone a light on the challenges faced by the region, such as eroding trust in the institutions to the rise of the populist movements, as well as the already discussed ever-present external influences. Looking at these challenges, the panellists underscored the importance of nurturing grassroots movements, civil society and independent media as pillars and guiding lights for democratic resilience.

It is crucial to understand the local realities in the Western Balkans and build sustainable democratic ecosystems. The dialogue advocated for a collaborative approach that would include and make use of local knowledge, and partnerships between International organizations, NGOs , activists and the whole broader civil society.

The panellists also delved into more specific areas where stronger support for democratic initiatives could yield considerable impacts. Among these was the promotion of civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as crucial actors involved in the promotion of democratic governance, the rule of law, transparency, and accountability. Numerous bottom-up initiatives are crucial for engaging democratic movements and engagement on a local level. There is enthusiasm within the population that is unfortunately largely neglected by the EU, and while the EU focuses on leadership, it forgets to find allies among the citizens.

The EU takes for granted the amount of enthusiasm there is for enlargement, and without offering enough of a listening ear to the active citizens and civil society, the feeling of injustice is rising, and with it, the disenchantment into the European Union. The young people in the region are pushing for change, but they need something back, or they will cease to believe there is hope for change.

Lura Pollozhani, a Researcher at the Centre for Southeast European Studies, highlights the importance and impact of the often forgotten feminist movements, as they are very consistent and constantly demand systemic change. These movements that actually push for systemic change need to be taken into consideration also in the larger context and need to be heard. When the decision-makers fail to listen to the European Union, activists are still there to lead the change. The role of independent media was also mentioned in the discussion, as it plays an important role in combating misinformation, ensuring freedom of expression, and providing a platform for diverse narratives.

The promotion of democracy is especially crucial as per the liberal peace theory, democracies do not wage wars against democracies, which can also bring lasting peace to the region. Despite the challenges of democratic development, it is beneficial in the long run. And for the development of democracy, civil society and political culture can be crucial. That is, therefore, a failure of the EU, as it focused mainly on relations with the regional executive branch but left behind actors that could also bring about change.

In synthesizing the discussions, the event painted a vision for democratic initiatives that are both hopeful and pragmatic. It called for a stronger commitment to the cause of democracy in the Western Balkans, entailing cooperation that considers the agency of local communities and builds upon the foundations of democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law.

Insights from the Western Balkan countries

Towards the end of the event, panellists also shared insights into some of the individual Western Balkan countries' democratic, electoral, and integration processes. Srdjan Majstorović, Chairman of the Governing Board of the European Policy Centre – CEP in Belgrade, gave his insights on Serbia as a test for the EU's credibility. Serbian elections last year were seen as held in unjust positions, and Members of the European Parliament called for investigations (Kobeščak Smodiš, 2024). New elections were announced for this April, but the EU needs to, in general, think about how to address the erosion of democracy in Serbia, as it is a central country of the region, and events within Serbia can have negative impacts on the whole region. The party of President Vučić has been in power for 12 years

now, and critical voices from the civil society, journalists and even actors are being silenced. Most of these voices continue to look to the EU as a key actor; however, if it hopes to maintain credibility, it must act on the Serbian elections and not leave the country hanging. However, no matter the internal issues and autocratic tendencies, for the outside, Vučić plays a role of stability in terms of geopolitics, and then democracy is collateral in these geopolitical and geoeconomic games in the region.

Jovana Marovic, Former Deputy Prime Minister and European Affairs Minister of Montenegro elucidated the situation in Montenegro, where she says that the level of democracy is the same compared to the last ten years or so. However, the current government has a better judiciary, Montenegro is now a NATO member, regional cooperation is flourishing, and it seems like this is a great country to test democratic rules on. Here, the EU must step up and demonstrate to Montenegro that a full democratic transition is feasible, and as Montenegro is a frontrunner for enlargement, any success achieved in this country can be applied to others later on. Thus, the EU needs to provide funds and incentives and provide real support to the countries on the ground; it requires new and better methods to truly promote democracy.

For perspectives on North Macedonia, Nikola Dimitrov, President and co-founder of the Balkan Center for Constructive Policies—Solution, North Macedonia, dives deeper into the country's work. As we have seen from North Macedonia's example, elections are not always the solution, and they do not necessarily bring a change of power or any systemic change. Citizens need to wake up and be mobilized as they are the ones that can carry change. And the EU can play a major role in the impact on citizens and motivating them. If the Western Balkans countries are not sure that EU membership is at the end of the tunnel, they will not act. When it comes to North Macedonian politics, the established political parties are not enough and not willing to change, and independent candidates have an incredibly hard time attempting to run. Without democratic change within the parties, it will be very challenging to turn around the current situation, but the trigger for change can come from the EU. There is, however, no time to waste, and change will not occur on its own.

Questions from the audience

In the vibrant dialogue during the event, the audience also addressed additional topics by asking questions taken up by the panel. These questions not only broadened the audience's horizons on the topic but also underscored the multifaceted nature of the issues discussed.

One significant area of inquiry revolved around the profound impact of enormously rising poverty in the region. With persistent poverty, the costs of living are rising and becoming unbearable for the poor, who barely have enough for food and energy bills. Poverty is, therefore, becoming a growing issue in the Western Balkans (OSCE, 2024).

The alarming numbers of poverty raised concerns also for the potential ramifications for the political participation across the Western Balkans. Especially as the speakers pointed out that people who primarily focus on being able to feed their families and keeping a roof over their heads will only focus on these primal issues and will not be as interested in self-realization, political participation and involvement in civil society. Such economic strains could possibly, therefore, fuel political instability or at least give more power to the populist and autocratic leadership due to a lack of social capital to help implement democracy and hold leaders accountable, therefore underlining the serious need to address the socio-economic challenges in the region.

Furthermore, the audience posed questions about the threats of hybrid warfare, notably from actors such as Russia using disinformation and supporting populist parties, aiming to disrupt democratic institutions and electoral integrity. The speakers then discussed the need for a robust strategic communications strategy that encompasses both safeguarding against disinformation campaigns and fostering resilience within the societal and political fabrics of the Western Balkan nations. The EU needs to get more engaged with the region through a proactive approach and not just allow the narratives to play out.

The questions then also veered towards evolving public opinion regarding the EU, particularly among the youth, with notable declines in support for EU integration seen in North Macedonia and Serbia, and the EU's communication strategies to keep the support in the region. Despite the fact that EU membership remains important for the region and support for integration is still fairly high (59%), there

is evidence that support is declining, already being 3% lower than in 2021 (RCC, 2024). In Serbia, only 43% of the population would support EU membership, while 33% would be against it (Ministry of European Integration, 2023). Polls in Serbia have also shown a generally unfavourable view of the EU as an institution from over 40% of the public in Serbia (Between East and West Democracy, Disinformation and Geopolitics in Central and Southeastern Europe, 2021). So, we can clearly see that the support in Serbia is particularly low. This shows a critical challenge for the EU's enlargement policy and its ability to keep the continued aspiration towards integration among some of the candidate countries. There is a lack of sense of purpose and identity processes.

When it comes to communication strategies, the EU needs to be clear on which values it promotes and needs to lead with transparency. Furthermore, it needs to focus on the needs of the population that often votes on an emotional and impulsive level, so it is often not due to ideology but about institutions often failing to communicate the values and why these are valuable for the voters as well. It should be noted that citizens are generally the ones who can speak directly to politicians and are the allies for reform. They are not afraid of change, and if reformist leadership arises, citizens may be on board, and participatory democracy may, in that case, prove to be the solution to the crisis. Therefore, the EU needs to lead as the driving force of identity and reimagine itself as an attractive source of values and something the Western Balkans countries will strive for.

The questions underscored an urgent need for the EU and Western Balkan leaders to make the EU narrative more relevant and appealing again, as the public and its opinion play a pivotal role in the region's future path towards European integration. Overall, these questions from the event's audience enriched the dialogue and raised new points that underscored the pressing need for comprehensive approaches to addressing the challenges of democracy and governance in the Western Balkans.

With these insights, the event provided an opportunity for critical reflection on the region's future, and the importance of dialogue, strategic action as well as cooperation to successfully navigate the region on its path more democratic and stable future.

Conclusion

This event and the discussion on democracy in the Western Balkans underscored a critical need for resilience. The future ahead might be worrisome, and it is things beyond the victory of the far-right in this year's elections that we have to worry about.

With all the escalating external influences, pressures and internal challenges, the region stands at a crossroads between regression and reform. The discussion also highlighted a dire need for international support, especially from the EU, with a reinvigorated commitment to support democratic values in order to counteract autocratic tendencies and democratic backsliding.

Furthermore, the dialogue shone a light on the indispensable role of civil society and regional cooperation in fostering democratic ethos. As the Western Balkans face the super-election year of 2024, the insights gained from this event can offer some hope as well as a roadmap to maintain momentum towards democratic consolidation. This discussion provided us with an opportunity to think about ways to make the year 2024 not a doomsday or a world-ending event but rather something that gives hope for the future. In many ways, the Western Balkans serve as a seismograph for broader European and global trends. This is why it is imperative to examine the situation carefully, as the repercussions extend far beyond the region. The journey ahead might be challenging, but events such as this one, full of discussions and solutions, can underscore a resilient step towards a more democratic future.

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