

19 – 20 October 2023, Skopje, North Macedonia

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of
North Macedonia

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE REPORT

**"A Wider European Community: The importance of
local governance " A roadmap for the Western
Balkans, Moldova, and Ukraine on the road for EU
accession**



The conference was organized by the European Association for Local Democracy – ALDA in partnership with the Macedonian Ministry for Foreign Affairs. It was financially supported by the Central European Initiative, the Council of Europe, and its Center of Expertise for Local Government Reform, and the EU.

Report

The International Conference on "A Wider European Community: The Importance of Local Governance" convened in Skopje from October 19-20, 2023, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia. The conference brought together stakeholders, experts, and leaders from the Western Balkans, Moldova, and Ukraine to discuss and analyze the challenges and opportunities associated with EU integration in the region.

The two-day event gathered more than sixty participants at the amphitheater of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia. Government officials, representatives from the international and local organizations, diplomats, professors and experts from the countries in focus shared their insights on the matter.

The panelists discussed the necessity of increased collaboration among Western Balkan countries to address common challenges and promote shared initiatives for regional stability, as well as to encourage active diplomatic efforts and initiatives to strengthen good neighborly relations, fostering stability and cooperation in the region.

Effective management of EU funds enhances capacities for successful EU integration, brings closer to the public the regional cooperation efforts and raises awareness of EU integration processes

The discussions were an excellent opportunity for the Western Balkans countries, Moldova, and Ukraine to extract lessons from countries that have successfully completed the EU integration process.



Ms. Fatmire Isaki, The Deputy Minister of Foreign affairs of North Macedonia welcomed the participants, emphasizing the country's full commitment to regional integration through political, economic and other initiatives. "I believe that we, as a region, must increase our efforts to contribute to internal reforms, as well as to regional cooperation, and increase the frequency of good neighborly relations and reconciliations", said Isaki.

Ms. Ivana Holoubková, the Deputy Secretary General of Central European Initiative, continued on the importance of regional cooperation, especially in difficult times marked by the war in Ukraine, pandemics, and similar crises.

Mr. Oriano Otocan, the President of ALDA, welcomed the participants through a video conference, stating that ALDA, in cooperation with the LDAs, is doing precisely what is needed in the enlargement process, referring to the capacities of ALDA to support and manage the EU funds within its international network.

The Macedonian media took on his statement comparing the EU enlargement throughout the years, in particular in Croatia, where the EU integration process lasted 8 years. "Now we have a gap of 10 years, which is the biggest since the first enlargement of the European Union, but I am afraid that it might be bigger", he stated.



During the first panel “Europe and Western Balkans, Moldova and Ukraine – integration and enlargement” the participants: Ms. Simonida Kacarska – Director of the European Policy Institute in Skopje, Ms. Senida Mesi – Former Deputy Prime Minister & MP of Albania, Ms. Natasa Vuckovic, Secretary General of Center for Democracy Foundation Serbia and Mr. Hennadiy Maksak – Executive Director of Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”, who participated online, all emphasized the necessity of cooperation and a shared vision among regional partners for building a wider European community.

The panelists recognized that tangible progress begins at the local level, where communities and leaders collaborate for change. It is important to prioritize local government efforts for effective EU integration, acknowledging their unique understanding of regional circumstances.

This introduced the following panel “Challenges of Enlargement Policy for Local Communities”, where Mr. Kiril Partalov, State Secretary at Ministry for Local Self-Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, Mr. Arber Vokrri, Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Local Government Administration of Kosovo*, Antonella Valmorbida, ALDA Secretary General and Ms. Inna Volkova, Member of the Council of the City of Odessa, opened discussions explaining the different stages of relations of each country with the EU.





From the Stabilization and Association Process to ongoing accession negotiations, the Western Balkans, Moldova, and Ukraine face similar reforms and share key challenges in rule of law, fundamental rights, economic and social development. Recent candidate status grants to Bosnia, Moldova, and Ukraine, along with accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, showcased a collective commitment to stability and growth.

Acknowledging the historical shortcomings in EU-Ukraine relations, stressed the need for a solid connection between regional and local cooperation. Foster collaboration among CSOs and enhance regional cooperation to strengthen ties and trust, while addressing historical challenges is needed to solve bilateral issues and trust building.

Identifying the challenges in North Macedonia, Moldova and Ukraine stressed the importance of addressing bilateral issues directly, and focusing on democratizing these relationships for smoother integration. Ukraine's efforts are acknowledged, but challenges, such as the loss of human resources and the ongoing war, remain.

The EU Commission Guidelines were examined during all panels, and providing assistance and training to candidate countries, especially Ukraine, is essential to address challenges and facilitate EC guidelines' implementation. At the panel "Aligning WB, Moldova, and Ukraine – Is regional cooperation a solution for European perspective?" the participants could find out more about the Implementation of European Commission Guidelines, after gaining candidate status.

Ms. Ana Krstinovska, President of ESTIMA, Ms. Viorica Tudos, Director of ALDA office in Chisinau, Mr. Bartek Ostrowski, Consultant for LDAs development in Ukraine and Sladjan Ilic, Delegate of Local Democracy Agency Zavidovici, as well as professor Mr. Michal Vit, Assistant professor in international relations at the Metropolitan University in Prague who participated online, recognized that other countries too are marked by the past, recent and ongoing wars, directly and indirectly which is influencing the progress of the countries.





Local democracy and public support are important, especially in implementing various projects that can help in recognizing the success of the decentralization process in EU integration, providing significant financial support for local and regional development. The participants stressed the need for public support, reforms, and involvement of local communities in the EU enlargement process in order to focus on harmonious development in different territories, by involving local communities, and maintaining public support for democratic forces.

Empowering local democracy for inclusive societies, highlighting the commitment of CSOs to empower local democracy for inclusive, progressive, and peaceful societies are even more significant when local efforts merge into national and international joint actions. Empowered local democracy, recognizing its key role in building inclusive and peaceful societies can build synergy between local authorities and civil society, as long as there is a shared vision and cooperation.

This is why the collaboration between local authorities and civil society organizations should be encouraged, based on shared goals and inclusive decision-making.

These topics on the first day of the conference turned the event into a platform of exchange and discussions between the speakers and the participants, advocating for maintaining contact at various levels, bridging intergenerational gaps, and combating brain drain, building bridges between the past and the future.

On the following day the participants promoted the tools and experiences for better cooperation and tackling the challenges on the EU path. Since the changes started at the local level, Mayors of Macedonian municipalities presented the “ELOGE benchmark principles” and their implementation, presenting local and regional initiatives and good practices from the wider European community.

Mr. Timco Micunski, Mayor of Municipality of Aerodrom, Mr. Zvonko Pekeski, Mayor of Municipality of Berovo, Mr. Borce Trenovski, Phd Associate Professor and Katica Janeva, Head of Unit Western Balkans and ALDA Skopje Office Director described the positive results from the participation in the self-assessment process, sharing their insights and conclusions from the terrain. Mr. Niall Sheerin, Centre of Expertise for Good Governance, CoE shared his experience with the ELOGE self-assessment of the municipalities, explained the improvements that will be introduced and revealed the plans for a second round of self-assessment with Macedonian Municipalities scheduled for the following year.



ALDA is accredited for the implementation of the EloGE project in North Macedonia, and discussed the essence to develop and implement a plan with direct involvement from ELOGE staff and collaboration with Civil Society Organizations.

Overall implementing such activities are helping in enhancing financial stability, fostering innovation, and improving the quality of life at the local level. The local governments need to assess the work rigorously, involve citizens in decision-making, and ensure adherence to principles of good democratic governance.

The conference ended with the celebration of 30 years of Local Democracy Agencies in the Western Balkans. The panelists, Ms. Antonella Valmorbida, ALDA Secretary General, Ms. Stanka Parac, Delegate of the LDA Subotica, first LDA that opened in the ninetens in Serbia, Ms. Dzenana Dedic, Delegate of Local Democracy Agency Mostar and Mr. Vullnet Gusia, from the Municipality of Peja reflected on past achievements but also set the stage for continued efforts in promoting local democracy.

LDAs can further enhance their impact and contribute to the broader goals of stability, development, and democratic governance in the Western Balkans region, as long as they continue their collaboration between LDAs and municipalities. This success story from the conflict aftermath toward European integration highlighted the positive outcomes of such partnerships.

The screening of the documentary movie 30 years of LDAs in the WB, by Mr. Francesco Zarzana from Progettarte (Italy) showcased the destroying and also rebuilding of bridges literally and figuratively, leaving the participants of the conference with a sense of hope for a brighter European future.



Conclusions

- The conference underscores the significance of local governance, collaboration, and public involvement in the EU integration process.
- By focusing on empowering local democracy, the communities can build up to societies of inclusion, progress and peace. Merging the local efforts in national and international joint actions can have a multiplier effect, and the municipalities should be ready to be the drivers of the implementation of the reforms, because they are the closest to the citizens.
- The commitment of Western Balkans nations to EU integration aligns with the principles upheld by European institutions. Focusing on empowering local democracy helps the nations to lay the foundation for more inclusive and equitable societies. A thriving local democracy is a necessity for local economic development.
- ALDA as a global network is always trying to build on the shared values, not letting wars and conflicts be the links between the countries, always promoting peace and reconciliation. Regional stability and conflict resolutions are key priorities in line with the EU perspective. The conference served as an insight of the geopolitical factors for the Western Balkans countries, Ukraine and Moldova.
- One of the fundamental takeaways from the conference is the synergy between local authorities and civil society organizations. This collaboration, characterized by a shared vision, has the potential to bring meaningful changes starting at the local level, in the services of the citizens in their communities.
- This conference marked a significant step towards building a wider European community. It serves as a reminder that true progress begins at the local level, where communities and their leaders come together to effect change.

- The recommendations highlight the need for targeted efforts, transparency, and inclusive decision-making to foster regional cooperation and ensure successful EU enlargement. As local efforts merge into national and international actions, the empowerment of local democracy emerges as a key factor in building inclusive, progressive, and peaceful societies within the broader European community.

Recommendations

The participants of the **International Conference: "A Wider European Community: The importance of local governance " A roadmap for the Western Balkans, Moldova, and Ukraine on the road for EU accession**, held on 19 – 20 October 2023 in Skopje, affirmed the commitment to the objectives discussed during this conference to make positive changes in our communities and regions. Together, we imagine a future where strong local governance helps create a more inclusive and united European community, with the Western Balkans, Moldova, and Ukraine on their way to joining the EU.

With the reference of:

- The CEI Plan of Action offers a strategic framework and goal-oriented roadmap tailored to meet the needs of Member States, while advancing the mission of the organization to achieve two far-reaching priorities, namely supporting European integration and promoting sustainable development of the CEI region.
- The EU enlargement policy encouraging democratic and economic reforms in countries that want to become EU members and promotes greater stability and prosperity in Europe. The EU is committed to the European perspective of the Western Balkans, has close links with the Western Balkans partners and cooperates with them in several important areas. The EU also provides substantial assistance and financial support to the region.
- The Ukraine facility proposal that will support Ukraine's efforts to sustain macro-financial stability, promote recovery as well as modernize the country whilst implementing key reforms on its EU accession track. It will support the transition towards a green, digital and inclusive economy that is progressively aligned with EU rules and standards.
- Reflecting on the current state of the enlargement process in the Western Balkans, Moldova, and Ukraine, we recognize the complexity and multifaceted perspective of this journey marked by progress, while facing obstacles. The recent granting of EU candidate country status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, and Ukraine as well as the initiation of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, underscores the European Union's dedication to fostering stability and security on our continent.

- We acknowledge the crucial role that local and regional governments play in providing essential services, fostering a sense of belonging, and building cohesive communities. It is imperative that local communities are well-prepared to navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by European enlargement processes.
- We encourage the joint efforts of local authorities and civil society organizations working together, acknowledging their significant role in driving and fostering changes locally and supporting EU enlargement as a process of peace, democratic affirmation and stabilization and economic opportunity. This community approach, linking local authorities and civil society, has been instrumental in the development of policies and programs aimed at fostering inclusion and equality within our communities. Local democracy stands as a strong force, providing solutions to local economic development challenges.
- The Local Democracy Agencies represent in the Balkans and in Eastern Partnership Countries a fundamental support for the cohesion of the community and local governance empowerment. They proved their added value in democracy, social and economic support with a resilience, which is quite unique, while ALDA is celebrating 30 years of activities of the LDAs in the Balkans. They could accompany the transition phases with a long standing relationship of decentralized cooperation, with the support of European and local partners.
- Western Balkans, Moldova, and Ukraine have shown their dedication to European integration by emphasizing the importance of working closely together regionally before joining the EU. We understand that Western Balkan States, Moldova, and Ukraine are at different EU engagement stages, but we share common challenges in areas like rule of law, fundamental rights, and economic development. Furthermore, it is important for citizens to be involved in the reform process.

30 November 2023, Skopje, North Macedonia
ALDA Skopje