

WESTERN BALKANS FUND

NEWSLETTER

On 1-3 March 2022, WBF in close cooperation with V4 partners gathered key stakeholders in the regional conference “**FIRE - Promote culture of tolerance and mutual respect within two regions**”. The event gathered 100 international, regional and national media experts, journalists, academics and civil society representatives from WBF Contracting parties and V4 Countries. In the Western Balkans, hate speech particularly targets members of vulnerable groups, who have already been affected by stigma and discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic, that's why this conference addressed ways to mobilize stakeholders of two regions to combat hate speech and promote human rights and how the hate speech impacts the overall cooperation among communities in the regions, aiming at enhancing regional cooperation efforts through people-to-people links and promoting dialogue among Civil Society sector around the Western Balkans as a tool for reconciliation processes. **Page 5-7**



The curtain is falling...

We are close to declaring **our new regional champions, the grantees of our 4th Call for Proposals**.

Stay tuned for more! The 4 CFP is co-funded by the European Union, through IPA-Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance.



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HIGH LEVEL MEETING IN TIRANA



On March 9th, a delegation from Sarajevo, with Assistant Minister at the MFA, ambassador Ahmet Halilovic and his colleagues paid a visit to the WBF Secretariat.

They were briefed by the Executive Director, Dr. Gjergj Murra, and Program Manager, Mr. Denis Grbo, about the current projects and the current Call for Proposals.

On his behalf, Ambassador Halilovic recognized the unique value of the Western Balkans Fund, as a ground-breaking regionally owned mechanism that promotes cooperation on a large scale and expressed his support for the planned expansion of our organisation.

WBF JOINS THE IVF EVALUATION SESSION

Another WBF-IVF joint action makes our partnership ever stronger. On March 23, three members from WBF participated in the Visegrad's Fund Evaluation Session discussing 220 project applications submitted in the February Visegrad Grant Call, focusing on development of the Western Balkans under the Visegrad+ grant scheme. The team was composed by Mr. Fjordi Bisha, WBF-EU Joint Action Manager; Mr. Klevis Gjoni, PR Officer and Mr. Uros Citakovic, MEL Officer.



HAPPY INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY FROM WBF SECRETARIAT



"If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman." - Margaret Thatcher. Happy International Women's Day to our female colleagues. You are the soul and heart of our organisation. On this day, WBF joins not only the celebration for the many achievements of our mothers, sisters, wives, partners, daughters, and friends but also to the most important struggle of all, the fight for complete gender equality.

A step closer to announcing the champions of the 4th Call for Proposals

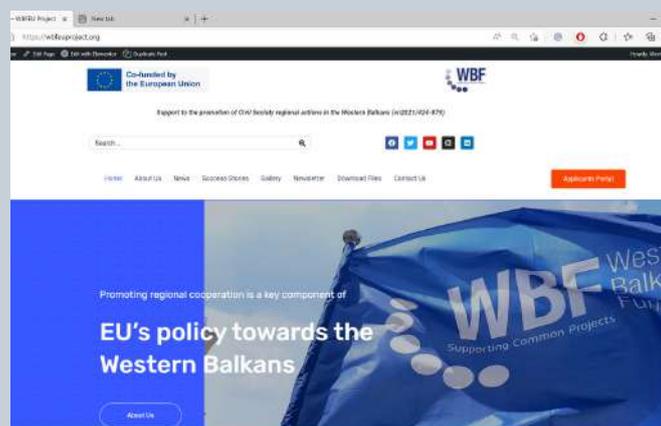


Picture taken during the Evaluation Panel of 23 February 2022

The 4th Call for Proposals, launched on 8 of November 2021, with more than 800 stakeholders involved and 207 projects submitted, is coming to the long-awaited end. The evaluation of the individual projects, conducted with the assistance of external evaluators, closed officially in February. All the 4th Call for Proposals applicants were formally notified in the first days of March. During the second week of March, the Western Balkans Fund made itself available for clarifications for all the non-awarded applicants while simultaneously starting the process of negotiations with the shortlisted candidates. The final negotiated list was forwarded to the Committee of Senior Officials, who approved the recommended list within the foreseen window for approval. With the negotiations over and the final list supported, the Western Balkans Fund is currently organizing the big awarding ceremony, which will take place in the middle of April. The complete list of the awarded projects will be announced in the coming days.

A new website dedicated to the WBF-EU joint action

A new website dedicated to the WBF-EU joint action is being developed and will be launched very soon. The new website will provide many new features for the followers of the Western Balkans Fund, such as a new newsletter, selected success stories, more opportunities to participate, etc. The website will work simultaneously with our homepage (www.westernbalkansfund.org) and will be accessible through the address (www.wbfeuproject.org)



A new financial management policy to support the WBF growth

In line with the substantial growth achieved in the last year, the Western Balkans Fund is currently approving a new Financial Management Policy. This policy will support the growing portfolio and the programming of the Fund and include recommendations from the partners. The new guidelines will achieve a higher standard of accountability and provide the Fund with a tool to become more relevant on the regional scale. The new Financial Management Policy has been concluded through the financial support provided by Peace Nexus and with the external expertise of UHY ELITE. The UHY Elite, in cooperation with the designated WBF experts, has finalized the WBF financial policy and manual. Several exchanges and consultation meetings have taken place over many months. In practice, this keystone document establishes the guiding principles in formalizing the decision approach in the financial management of the Fund towards the achievement of its vision and mission. This set of regulations and rules impacts the decisions model of the Fund and operational decision-making by highlighting the rules, values, and beliefs of the Fund. Policies in this document apply to all personnel engaged in the financial management of the Fund employed through a full-time or part-time employment contract by the Western Balkans Fund. The new policy will be presented for endorsement in the next Council of the Committee of the Senior Officials.



The Summer Day is a national holiday in Albania, but we were at work, trying to better ourselves as a ground-breaking regional mechanism. Currently, finding new pathways to inspire and engage our growing community, and by doing so, we are building the foundations of a much more resilient, influential, and resourceful regional organisation.

The Fund is in the process of finalizing the new Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning framework, in collaboration with Ms. Ajsa Hadzibegovic and PeaceNexus Foundation, our long-standing and precious partner, which we duly thank for the unique contribution and focus provided to the Western Balkans.

Improved manuals on MEL and HR

Improving the Finance manuals is in line with a complete overhaul of the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Manuals and the Human Resources manual. For this purpose, to track the implementation of the Action Plan that addresses the Swiss Partners Risk Assessment findings, the Secretariat team met with representatives of the Swiss Embassy in Tirana on 11th of March. The majority of the results of the PRA are to be addressed through the improved WBF Manuals and Procedures, respectively on Finance, Human Resources and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning. Although the preparation of these manuals is of high importance for implementing the Swiss support and improving the operational standards of WBF, the financial implications for the Swiss are minimal. All the costs related to the external expertise recruited for preparing the manuals are covered through the support of PeaceNexus.

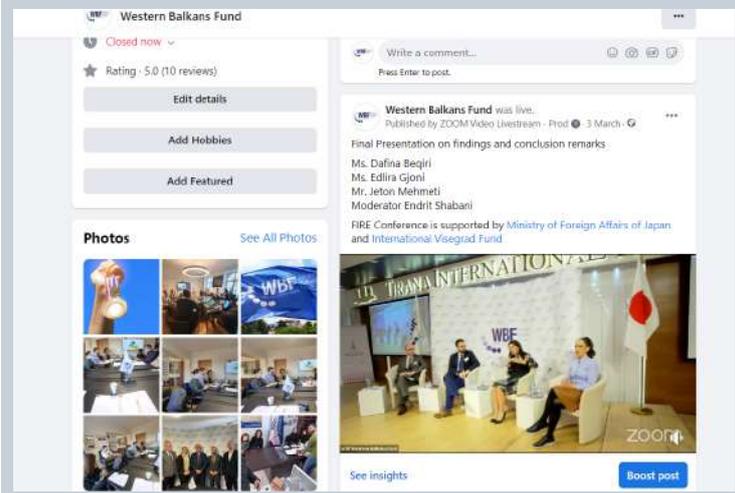
Platform to fight hate speech and promote human rights



The regional cooperation remains one of the greatest achievements of the Western Balkans and Visegrad regions, positively influencing regional stability and bringing various practical benefits for its citizens and societies. To this end, strengthening of the regional cooperation represents an essential requirement for the Western Balkan contracting parties in their EU membership aspirations.

In cooperation with Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan WBF, IVF implemented a project on addressing hate speech and defamation which largely contribute to an offensive language targeting ethnic, religious, sexual minorities, immigrants and other groups is a widespread phenomenon within Western Balkans region.

Do you know that...
The panels of the Conference were livestreamed entirely through WBF official Facebook address.
3.2K people added online





The FIRE Conference, divided in seven panels, offer clear frame of reference, a comprehensive approach to hate speech and tackles hate speech phenomena that may result in short sighted and fragmented strategies. More than 80 distinguished guests participated in the three-day Conference. Those are some of the most important quotes of the panels.

Besa Luci, Editor in-Chief **Fatjona Mejdini, Investigative Journalism Lab**

“What are the voices that I am not hearing and not seeing in the media? Just because they are not there, this doesn’t mean they don’t exist”.

“We have to push people to seek their right and push their cases to the court”

Dafina Beqiri, WBF Programme Manager “We realize that no matter how much you try to tackle regional cooperation, there is always one gap, which is communication. We need to start unlearning what we learned until now”.

H.E. Takada Mitsuyuki, Ambassador of Japan to Albania

“Wonderful, splendid conference and I hope that all of you learned a lot of things. In particular, is very important to establish a network between all attendees. Hate speech is a very important issue globally”

Darko Sokolic, Propulsion “For this new word, we need a new kind of literacy”.

Ivan Vejvoda, Acting Rector of the Institute for Human Sciences

“Is from top to bottom. We elect people to lead us, but it doesn’t always happen that they truly lead”.

Davor Marko, Thomson’s Balkans programme manager “This is innovation versus regulation approach. It can be also be read like business vs human rights clash”.

Gjergj Murra, Executive Director of the Western Balkans Fund

“We are here to provide to you the possibility of enhancing cooperation, exchange and communication”.

Edlira Gjoni, WBF expert “We are all together in it and simply because we are together, we have to fight together”

Erion Veliqaj, Mayor of Tirana “Truth should always float the fake news”.

Panels of the Conference

- Hate speech and cyberbullying as a global (anti)culture?
- Hate speech a potential disturbance towards social cohesion
- Hate Speech on Women
- The defamation’s risks and ways to deal with it
- Regulating Hate Speech in the Media
- Hate speech in political communication
- How does Hate Speech affect Regional Cooperation



Karolina Zbytniatevska, EUROACTIV Poland “In polarisation we have enemies and not competitors”

Leon Malazogu, Ambassador “We have to promote this multi-layered society if we want to go forward”

Nikola Dimitrov, Former Deputy Prime Minister of North Macedonia “In any democracy, the backbone is informed citizens”.

Nikola Burazer, program director of Center for Contemporary Politics in Belgrade. “If we focus here in the region, a big problem is going past this entrenched prejudices”

Pavle Jankovic, WBF Committee of Senior Officials from Belgrade

“It was truly an amazing experience to listen to so many people who have a quite many things to say about the scourge of our times, which is hate speech”.

Petr Grk, Secretary-General of Bled Strategic Forum “In the times of great tectonic shifts, especially on the European Continent, a lot of things have changed already”.

Remzi Lani, Executive Director of Albanian Media Institute “Freedom of expression is the first victim of disinformation”.

Urska Umek, Head of Media Unit at the Council of Europe's Information Society

“Politization and political instability can prove to be fertile ground for a lot of hate speech and hateful expressions”

Veronika Bundzikova, BRNO, Masaryk University

“I believe hate speech begins with bias and stereotypes”.

**Ranked by alphabetic order of the given names.*

Promoting Culture of Tolerance is more important than ever



Selected Remarks from Gjergj Murra, Executive Director of the Western Balkans Fund. Why hate speech? Why is it so important to bring this topic into the spotlight? I must confess that those are the same questions we asked when we sat down with the Japanese Embassy and the International Visegrad Fund to plan this event. We agreed to target this topic, considering how hate speech is on the rise across Europe, jeopardizing social cohesion and putting human rights under threat.

Through this Conference, we want to provide a platform for discussions to the relevant stakeholders on how to tackle hate speech and to promote human rights. All with a view and focused on how hate speech impacts the overall cooperation among communities in the region. Fighting hate speech was considered a relevant topic, a key objective for Japan, and in the focus of the IVF since its establishment 22 years ago. And that is why bringing V4 experience and best practices on countering hate speech to this platform was considered as a great added value.

In that regard, I sincerely believe that the contribution of more than 40 distinguished speakers from both WBF and V4 regions, including politicians, community leaders, civil society representatives, journalists, regional experts, etc, and more than 80 participants during the 3-days Conference will help us have a consolidated list of legal and practical recommendations in the fight against hate speech. And speaking about our distinguished participants, I sincerely appreciate your presence. Many of you postponed or cancelled other meaningful professional engagements to be in Tirana with us. On behalf of the Western Balkans Fund, I sincerely thank you for being here.

For more information related to this Newsletter,
please contact us: info@westernbalkansfund.org

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