



CIVIL  
SOCETY  
FORUM | TIRANA  
2023

# The Road to CSF Tirana 2023

**OPEN SOCIETY  
FOUNDATIONS**  
WESTERN BALKANS



#CSFTirana2023

# UNLOCKING PROGRESS

The European Future of the  
Western Balkans

14 / 15  
OCTOBER

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# Foreword

Open Society Foundations – Western Balkans (OSFWB), in cooperation with the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) and the Cooperation and Development Institute (CDI) had the privilege of organizing the 2023 Tirana Civil Society and Think Tank Forum (CSF), within the larger Berlin Process framework. CSF itself is a process that fosters constructive and inclusive dialogue among civil society representatives, public authorities, EU representatives, financial institutions, and other stakeholders from the Western Balkans and EU member states. By sharing best practices and developing policy recommendations, CSF brings in policy-making the voice of the Western Balkan citizens, advances regional cooperation, boosts EU-related reforms, and supports the accession process of the Western Balkan countries.

2023 Tirana CSF went through four phases: consultations (that span between May and September); advocacy component (May, June, September); the final CSF event (October); and follow up activities (December). In the consultations phase, seven thematic working groups were established, whose purpose was to: provide an assessment on the situation with reference to the Berlin CSF 2022 recommendations, and identify blocking factors & eventual progress; develop ideas and concrete advocacy positions based on last year's recommendations, thus enabling continuity between two Forums; initiate discussions and build early coalitions and synergies between civil society and policy makers (including relevant international institutions, organizations, or EU MS governments, etc.) with competences to accept or support the advocacy proposals by civil society, this way employing the concept of multi-layered connectivity. Thematically, the working groups focused on: (1) Energy; (2) Access to the European single market; (3) Digitalization and multi-layered connectivity; (4) Climate and Green Agenda; (5) Politics of enlargement; (6) Mobility and migration; (7) Security and geopolitics. Seven organizations, ensuring geographical diversity, thematic knowledge, and representation, were leading the consultations.

As part of the consultations, 21 online consultative meetings were held with more than 420 participants.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, 9 hybrid events were organized in Sarajevo, Belgrade, Prishtina, Skopje, Tirana, and Athens, with total outreach of more than 815 participants<sup>2</sup>. Each thematic working group has produced a policy paper detailing the sectoral recommendations and proposals<sup>3</sup>.

As organizers, we take this opportunity to express our profound gratitude to our thematic working group leads, for their professionalism and dedication to the process:

- **Centre Science and Innovation for Development – SCiDEV** (Albania);
- **Citizens' Association Why Not?** (Bosnia and Herzegovina);
- **European Policy Institute – EPI** (North Macedonia);
- **Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy – ELIAMEP** (Greece);
- **Institute for Good Governance and Policy for Environment and Climate Change – IPECC** (North Macedonia);
- **Kosovar Centre for Security Studies – KCSS** (Kosovo);
- **Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute – RERI** (Serbia).

As part of our **advocacy** efforts, we followed up with travelling to Berlin (June and September), Brussels (May and September) and Athens (September), where we held a total of 36 meetings with decision makers and civil society representatives. Our objective was to inform European and German decision makers and civil society counterparts of the CSF progress and do early advocacy of the emerging recommendations from the thematic consultations<sup>4</sup>.

To streamline the recommendations into the Berlin Process fora, the organizers and the thematic working group leads took part in: Berlin Process Preparatory Meeting on Climate Partnerships (June 6-7th); meeting of the Ministers of Interior (September 14th); Science Conference (September 18-20th); Conference of the European Climate Initiative (EUKI) (September 26th); Conference “Enhancing Berlin Process through Parliamentary Diplomacy” (September 12-13th); and to the Sixth Western Balkans Digital Summit (October 4-5th).

The CSF with its 14 panels spurred a constructive discussion on the implementation challenges of the recommendations coming from civil society and put additional pressure on decision makers to endorse CSF’s policy proposals. The conversations ranged: from unlocking progress in the region; seizing the momentum for enlargement; increasing trust between security institutions; advancing economic integration with the EU; assuring sustainable green investments; increasing transparency and accountability in the energy sector; increasing absorption capacities; strengthening integration into the European Research Area improving digital markets and services; and all the way to enhancing the Berlin Process through accountability mechanisms<sup>5</sup>. The event was followed by 279 in-person attendees and 398 online participants.

Since 2015, each iteration of CSF improves the process in different ways, so as this year’s organizers, we are also committed to supporting critical assessment of the role civil society has played in the Berlin Process and exploring ways in which civil society can increase its impact in shaping public policies within this framework. By supporting a set of follow up activities, we are aiming to propose a civil society mechanism for oversight of the Berlin Process.

In line with our commitment to continuity between Forums, we partnered up with the European Fund for the Balkans, to redesign and update the CSF webpage (<https://wb-csf.eu/>). We are hoping this would become a standard practice and the website will continue to serve as a centralized, institutional memory of the CSF.

Considering the political nature of the CSF and the Berlin Process, the Western Balkan public should be able to access timely, impartial, and credible information associated with it. We are especially grateful for the support from Euronews Albania and European Western Balkans, as well as the interest from local and regional media to provide coverage of the process.

We would like to extend our gratitude to the Albanian Government, for its continuous attention to CSF’s findings, assessments and proposals and its contribution to the final event with high level political presence.

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Finally, we thank the German Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Office of Special Representative for Western Balkans for the continuous support and guidance during our CSF 2023 endeavour.

**Open Society Foundations – Western Balkans (OSFWB)**

**Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)**

**Cooperation and Development Institute (CDI)**

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<sup>1</sup> See Annex 2 for list of participants.

<sup>2</sup> See Annex 3 for list of event, topics, dates, and locations.

<sup>3</sup> See page 53 for the policy papers.

<sup>4</sup> See Annex 4&5 for list of meetings.

<sup>5</sup> See page 20 for more detailed overview of each discussion.

# Fact Sheet

#CSFTirana2023



# 2023 Tirana Civil Society and Think Tank Forum Factsheet

## About CSFTirana 2023

The 2023 Tirana Civil Society and Think Tank Forum (CSF) is a series of events aimed at fostering dialogue, sharing best practices, and developing policy recommendations among civil society representatives, think-tankers, and experts from the Western Balkans (WB). The forum seeks to contribute to regional cooperation, EU-related reforms, and the accession process in the Western Balkans

The CSF is guided by the following principles, shaping its impact:

- Constructive and inclusive participation of civil society;
- Content continuity from one CSF to the next, building on the progress made;
- Multi-layered connectivity, linking WB civil society with relevant stakeholders;
- Contributing to WB6 convergence with the EU, strengthening reform processes.

7	Thematic working groups	36	Meetings in Berlin and Brussels, with decision-makers and think tanks
21	Online consultative meetings	7	Berlin Talks shows at Euronews Albania
452	Participants in the consultative meetings	11	Thematic panels, with more than 60 speakers at the 2023 Tirana Civil Society and Think Tank Forum
9	Hybrid public events in Sarajevo, Belgrade, Prishtina, Skopje, Tirana, and Athens	1	Redesigned webpage
809	Participants in the public events, including civil society, decision-makers, academia, and private sector		

## Thematic Working Groups (TWGs)

Seven TWGs will delve into key thematic areas, addressing critical regional challenges and driving policy development:



### Politics of Enlargement

Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy  
ELIAMEP (Greece)



### Energy

Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute  
RERI (Serbia)



### Access to the European Single Market

European Policy Institute  
EPI (North Macedonia)



### Climate and Green Agenda

Institute for Good Governance and Policy for Environment and Climate Change  
IPECC (North Macedonia)



### Mobility

Center Science and Innovation for Development  
SCiDEV (Albania)



### Security and Geopolitics

Kosovar Centre for Security Studies  
KCSS (Kosovo)



### Digitalization and Connectivity

Citizens' Association (CA)  
Why Not? (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

# Final Event

## Date

October 14-15th

## Venues

Presidential Palace,  
The Pyramid of Tirana,  
Rogner Hotel

## Location

Tirana, Albania



# Political Statement

&

# Key Recommendations

#CSFTirana2023

# Joint Statement

## Civil Society and Think Tank Forum 2023

Amidst a pivotal juncture characterized by significant shifts in global politics, transnational challenges, and intricate regional dynamics, bringing the Berlin Process to Tirana signifies a momentous milestone. This year's Summit highlights the ownership demonstrated by Western Balkan countries in their commitment to reforms, progress in their EU membership path and enhanced cooperation in the region.

Recognizing these challenges as well as existing efforts, the Civil Society and Think Tank Forum (CSF) 2023 aims to enhance regional and EU efforts to unlock progress towards the European future of the Western Balkans.

In the context of renewed enthusiasm for enlargement, CSF 2023 calls for a more streamlined and transparent process for countries aspiring to join the EU. This includes a strong focus on upholding the rule of law, involving civil society, and implementing effective governance reforms.

CSF 2023 encourages closer collaboration between the EU and Western Balkan countries to address security challenges, enhance stability, and promote reconciliation in the region. CSF 2023 supports efforts to tackle energy poverty, prioritizing decarbonization and clean energy transition, and ensuring accountable governance in EU enlargement and energy policy contexts.

In pursuit of global sustainability goals, CSF advocates for increased financial support to WB6, capacity building for local institutions, impactful regional cooperation, and alignment with EU policies on sustainability, climate action, and environmental preservation. Addressing modern age digital challenges, CSF calls for a coordinated EU-Western Balkans approach to implementing reforms, and prioritizing online user safety. Considering youth emigration, stronger cooperation between Western Balkan governments and the EU is encouraged in order to promote socio-economic development at home.

Prioritizing economic development, CSF calls for a clear EU integration plan, centered on the rule of law and economic reforms, with increased and better structured EU support, active stakeholder participation, and a commitment to implementing EU rules and towards effective regional Common Regional Market and further progress towards the Single Market.

Civil society remains a pivotal force in the reform processes within the Western Balkans, bringing together key stakeholders, reaffirming and amplifying the Process's mission to enhance regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, and enriching its objectives by deliberating on critical regional questions, and diligently crafting key recommendations for policymakers.

# Key Recommendations



## Access to the Single Market

The European Commission should present a plan with a feasible timeline to allow the markets of the Western Balkan Six to immediately access the EU Single Market in all areas that would not impose high adjustment costs and would be highly beneficial and visible for businesses and citizens.

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The Western Balkan governments should manifest their unequivocal commitment to implement and monitor the implementation of the reforms linked to the Single Market acquis.

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The European Commission and the Western Balkan leaders should ensure meaningful participation of relevant stakeholders, including CSO, by ensuring that the policy dialogue on EU integration to the Single Market is open and transparent to non-state actors and significantly increase the transparency of the planning, management, implementation, monitoring, reporting, and evaluation of pre-accession funds.



## Politics of Enlargement

The European Commission should prepare individual accession action plans (AAPs) that will contain intermediary milestones as incentives for each candidate country.

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Dispute resolution efforts should run in parallel to the implementation of the accession action plans (AAPs).

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The European Council should enable the European Commission to make use of the existing mechanisms for immediate reporting and triggering of sanctions for violations or backsliding in the area of rule of law.



## Digitalization and Connectivity

Establish a coordinated, regional approach to implementing the EU Digital Services Act or an equivalent regulatory instrument in the Western Balkans countries, to ensure equivalent safety and protection of online users in the region to those available in the EU.

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Accelerate and facilitate the entrance of the Western Balkans countries into EU digital single market, ensuring that the entire region advances at the same pace wherever possible.

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Advocate for the Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) and the Very Large Online Search Engines (VLOSEs) to expand the commitments of the Code of Practice against Disinformation (CoP) to the Western Balkans region.



## Mobility

Facilitate and finance the establishment of a comprehensive all-inclusive regional mobility framework agreement including students, researchers, university administrative staff, experts in the research and innovation ecosystem and professionals in related areas within the WB6.

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Support and co-finance the establishment of a Western Balkans Research Fund, as a dedicated mechanism through specific granting and supporting schemes on mobility, knowledge transfer, access to infrastructure and engagement of diaspora in research and innovation ecosystem within the Western Balkans and with the EU, addressing the current shortcomings of the Widening Participation and Horizon Europe programmes.

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Western Balkans Governments must commit to increase the percentage of investment in research and innovation up to 2% of GDP by 2030 to nurture a generation of researchers, experts, innovators, and thinkers who can redefine the region's future, provide avenues for brain circulation, and attract talents by engaging with peers in the region, EU and diaspora and strengthen integration in European Research Area.



## Climate and Green Agenda

Both the EU and the Western Balkans countries share the responsibility of enhancing Green Infrastructure within the Western Balkans region. The EU should increase its financial commitment to align with Western Balkans needs and establish a funding mechanism that embodies the principles of solidarity and a multi-level governance approach mirroring the successful model of the EU Cohesion Funds.

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A strong administration can maximize the EU integration opportunities. The Western Balkans Six should take swift action to enhance the capacities of national and sub-national authorities entrusted with environment and climate change responsibilities, including those responsible for programming and managing EU funds.

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Climate resilience cannot be achieved without investments in biodiversity and natural-based solutions. Leaders from the Western Balkans Six must secure sustainable funding for preserving and restoring the region's invaluable natural resources, with the goal of allocating 30% of national environmental and climate funds to biodiversity protection within the next five years. The EU should ensure that at least 30% of its climate-related funding for the Western Balkans is invested in biodiversity.



## Security and Geopolitics

During 2024, the national authorities in the Western Balkans should focus on establishing a screening mechanism for Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), or at least agree on regionally accepted standards for screening of investments.

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The European Commission should establish a financial facility solely dedicated to supporting reconciliation projects in the Western Balkans. For the new legislative term, the European Commission/DG-NEAR should put forward a proposal for the establishment of such a programme, under IPA, Global Europe, or another adequate instrument.

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During 2024, the European Commission should propose concrete measures on the integration of the Western Balkan countries in the work of the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), as well as in the EU Cybersecurity Incident Review Mechanism.



## Energy

To re-establish and improve the legal framework governing the regional energy market(s), the EU should facilitate an independent assessment report to the European Parliament (and the national parliaments) on the implementation of the Energy Community Treaty, accompanied by a proposal for further actions to induce an appropriate debate on EU level.

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An inclusive and multistakeholder dialogue should be launched to negotiate an extension to the Energy Community Treaty with necessary amendments, instead of annexing the existing Treaty. The platform should include stakeholders from the Energy Community, EU and its member states and the Western Balkan states.

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The EU and its member states and the Western Balkan states should establish a funding mechanism to finance economic restructuring of the coal regions and to combat energy poverty, from different, based on the existing platforms of the European Commission.

# Agenda

## DAY 1

OCTOBER 14, 2023  
SATURDAY

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## DAY 2

OCTOBER 15, 2023  
SUNDAY

#CSFTirana2023

# Agenda of #CSFTirana2023

## DAY 1 OCTOBER 14, 2023 | SATURDAY

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### 09:00 – 09:40 Launching Event

Pyramid of  
Tirana

#### Welcoming Remarks

- **Erion Veliaj**, Mayor of Tirana;
- **Andi Dobrush**i, Western Balkans Director, Open Society Foundations;

- **Manuel Sarrazin**, Federal Government's Special Representative (pre-recorded video message).
  - **Ioannis Armakolas**, Associate Professor, Senior Research Fellow & Head of South-East Europe Programme at ELIAMEP.
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### 09:40 – 09:50 Family photo in front of the Pyramid

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### 09:50 – 10:00 Transfer from the Pyramid to Rogner Hotel

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### 10:00 – 10:30 Registration at Rogner Hotel

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### 10:30 – 12:00 Opening Forum

Antigonea  
1 & 2

#### Unlocking progress: The European Future of the Western Balkans

Rule of law is a non-negotiable principle for EU accession and Western Balkan leaders must deliver on their commitments and show tangible progress in reforms. The renewed enthusiasm for enlargement and the reinvigorating debate in speeding it up, require the support, commitment and engagement of all actors – government, businesses, and civil society. As introduction of EU's new financial instruments is discussed, political and technical challenges such as corruption, organized crime, and weak institutions need to be tackled head on. This panel will address the link between economic prosperity, democratic transformation, and the perspective of EU membership for the Western Balkans.

#### Keynote speaker

- **Igli Hasani**, Minister, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs

#### Speakers

- **Michael Reiffenstuel**, Director for the Western Balkans at the Federal Foreign Office;
- **Michela Matuella**, Acting Director for the Western Balkans, Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations (online participation);
- **Odeta Barbullushi**, Advisor to the Prime Minister on Western Balkans & EU affairs;
- **Majlinda Bregu**, Secretary General, Regional Cooperation Council;
- **Milka Tadić Mijović**, President, Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro;
- **Donika Emini**, Executive Director, CiviKos.

#### Moderator

- **Ilva Tare**, Senior Fellow at Europe Center, Atlantic Council.
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### 12:00 – 12:30 Coffee break

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### 12:30 – 14:00 The Politics of Enlargement

Antigonea 1

#### How to seize the new momentum?

If there can ever be a silver lining in a war, the Russian aggression against Ukraine led to the acknowledgment that European unification through enlargement should continue without delay. The reality of a war on the European continent contributed to reinvigorating the debate on how to proceed further, and how to prepare both the EU to accept new members and the (potential) candidate countries to meet the membership requirements. Opportunities for blockages in the accession process are all too numerous, political commitment is not a given and the momentum can easily be lost. Against such a backdrop, it is important to examine the contentious aspects in order to anticipate and facilitate solutions. What is the way forward to streamline decision-making in the Council so that candidate countries can easily navigate from one step to the next? Can Member States be convinced to

refrain from vetoes on bilateral issues unrelated to the accession process? How to ensure that candidate countries deliver on the key reforms, and avoid backsliding, especially in the area of the fundamentals?

#### Speakers

- **Ditmir Bushati**, Former Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs;
- **Nikola Dimitrov**, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs;
- **Viola von Cramon-Taubadel**, Member of European Parliament, European Green Party (online participation);
- **Adnan Ćerimagić**, Senior Analyst for the Western Balkans, European Stability Initiative;
- **Ana Krstinovska**, Research Fellow, ELIAMEP; President, ESTIMA.

#### Moderator

- **Alexandra Voudouri**, Research Fellow and Journalist, ELIAMEP



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**12:30 – 14:00**

Antigonea 2

## **Breaking Barriers to Regional Security Cooperation**

### **How to Address Trust Issues Among Security Institutions in the Western Balkans?**

The brutal invasion of Ukraine by Russia has dramatically shifted geopolitical dynamics and energized efforts to bring the region closer to the EU. Effective security cooperation among the Western Balkan countries is central to the European integration and countering transnational threats to the region and the wider EU. The panel will discuss strategies for rationalizing regional security cooperation initiatives and building greater confidence for exchange and collaboration among security institutions in the region. It will also assess how the current state of regional security cooperation impacts potentially malign foreign influence, cybersecurity, organized corruption, corrosive capital, and more.

#### **Speakers**

- **Taulant Balla**, Minister of Internal Affairs;
- **Xhelal Sveçla**, Minister of Internal Affairs;
- **Josip Brkić**, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs;
- **Ramadan Ilazi**, Head of Research, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies;
- **Sonja Stojanović Gajić**, Independent Consultant.

#### **Moderator**

- **Valbona Zeneli**, Non-resident Senior Fellow, Europe Center, Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, Atlantic Council and Visiting Scholar, Harvard University

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**14:00 – 15:00**

Lunch at Rogner Hotel

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**15:00 – 16:30**

Antigonea 1

## **Full Access to the EU Single Market as a Pathway to Prosperity**

### **Can the Western Balkans Achieve Seamless Integration?**

The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans plan is an opportunity for the EU to offer a feasible strategy that would allow facilitated access for the countries from the region to the Single Market. Swiftly adopted trade derogations and market integration initiatives following the Russian aggression in Ukraine reflect the EU's capacity for strategic response in an evolving geopolitical context. Nevertheless, the full access of the Western Balkan to European markets ahead of membership is a challenging task. This panel will discuss which political and legal decisions need to be made to advance economic integration, as well as the need to improve capacities and put forward an economic rationale that gives credibility to the EU enlargement process.

#### **Speakers**

- **Jorida Tabaku**, Chairwoman of the European Affair Committee and Chairwoman of the National Council of European Integration;
- **Pranvera Kastrati**, Senior Connectivity Expert, Regional Cooperation Council;
- **Zdravko Ilić**, Senior Expert on Trade in Services, CEFTA;
- **Jeton Zulfaj**, Political Advisor, Office of the Prime Minister;
- **Nenad Djurdjević**, Director, Regional Center for Strategic and Political Initiatives;
- **Silvana Mojsovska**, Full-time Professor, Institute of Economics;
- **Stefan Ristovski**, Researcher, European Policy Institute.

#### **Moderator**

- **Dragana Djurica**, Secretary General, European Movement (EMinS)

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**15:00 – 16:30**

Antigonea 2

## **Greening the Western Balkans**

### **Uniting for Sustainable Infrastructure, Biodiversity Protection, and Effective Governance**

Meeting the EU requirements for environment and climate as well as fulfilling the Green Agenda obligations places a significant financial burden on the Western Balkan countries. On the other hand, the Green Agenda is a fundamental pillar in the EU's engagement with the Western Balkan countries, especially as it navigates the complex process of EU integration. This panel will address critical issues related to green infrastructural investments, environmental conservation, and governance in the Western Balkans region. It brings together experts, policymakers, and stakeholders to discuss holistic strategies aimed at fostering a more sustainable and environmentally responsible future in the Western Balkans.

#### **Speakers**

- **Sabit Gashi**, Acting Director of the Department of Energy, Ministry of Economy;
- **Radica Koceva**, IPA Management Expert;
- **Johannes Heidecker**, Advisor to the Prime Minister for Economic Issues;
- **Draško Boljević**, Executive Director of the Eco Fund;
- **Mirjam de Koning**, Executive Director, Prespa-Ohrid Nature Trust;
- **Petrica Dulgheru**, Chairman of the Board, Roma Economic Development Initiative.

#### **Moderator**

- **Jadranka Ivanova**, Institute for Good Governance and Policies in Environment and Climate Change

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**16:40 – 18:00** **A process that delivers**

Antigonea 1

**Enhancing the Berlin Process through Accountability Mechanisms**

In times where global challenges demand collaborative solutions, the Berlin Process has emerged as a vital platform for fostering cooperation and driving positive change in the Western Balkans. The panel will examine possible accountability mechanisms that can play a pivotal role in elevating the effectiveness and impact of the Berlin Process. Bringing together parliamentarians, experts, and media representatives, this session will explore the various facets of accountability within the Berlin Process, shedding light on the mechanisms, strategies, and best practices that can ensure tangible outcomes and progress. Participants will gain valuable insights into how accountability can reinforce commitments, enhance transparency, and bolster the overall success of the Berlin Process in areas such as regional stability, economic development, and political cooperation.

**Speakers**

- **Arbër Ademi**, Chairperson of the European Affairs Parliament Committee;
- **Aleksandra Tomanić**, Executive Director, European Fund for the Balkans;
- **Adelheid Feilcke**, Director of Programs for Europe, Deutsche Welle;
- **Viktoria Voglsinger-Palm**, Deputy Director, Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft e.V.;
- **Fatjona Mejdini**, Director of the Southeastern Europe Observatory, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime;
- **Geron Kamberi**, Independent Expert.

**Moderator**

- **Zoran Nechev**, Head of the Centre for European Integration and Senior Researcher, Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis”

# Agenda of #CSFTirana2023

## DAY 2 OCTOBER 15, 2023 | SUNDAY

**09:00 – 10:00** Arrival & Morning Coffee

Rogner Hotel

**10:00 – 10:45** Freedom?

Antigonea 1 The European Destiny of the Western Balkans

▪ **Conversation with Lea Ypi**, Professor in Political Theory, London School of Economics, led by **Igor Štiks**, Professor, Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University.

**11:00 – 12:30**

Antigonea 2

### Challenging ‘the Lack of Administrative Capacities’ Narrative

#### How Can the Western Balkans Absorb More EU Funding?

The Western Balkans access to the EU budget has remained limited and highly disproportionate to its level of market integration, with allocations remaining largely unchanged over the last three budgetary cycles. Both Western Balkan and EU actors have been advocating for increased funding for the region in support of economic convergence and meeting the EU accession criteria. However, this shift requires fitting in the larger sums for the candidate countries among the already mounting needs in the Union budget. Moreover, the Western Balkan countries would have to be ready to deliver mature projects and ensure their implementation, whilst respecting rule of law conditionality. This panel will reflect on the lessons learned from previous enlargement that could provide insights on how to address the bottlenecks in terms of absorption capacities and streamlining EU funding to meet the requirements of membership.

#### Speakers

- **Tanja Mišćević**, Minister of European Integration;
- **Drita Abdiu Halili**, State Secretary and Deputy Chief Negotiator with the EU, Secretariat for European Affairs;
- **Ambre Maucorps**, Economist, Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies;
- **Simonida Kacarska**, Director, European Policy Institute;
- **Anja Bosilkova-Antovska**, Head of Advocacy, Balkan Civil Society Development Network;
- **Damir Miljević**, Member of Managing Board, RESET (online participation).

#### Moderator

- **Matteo Bonomi**, Senior fellow, IAI Istituto Affari Internazionali

**11:00 – 12:30**

Antigonea 1

### Towards a Just and Inclusive Energy Transition

#### Accountability and Oversight of the Western Balkans Energy Sector

The years leading to 2030 will be crucial for the decarbonisation and energy transition of the Western Balkans. Ambitious and robust policies and measures are needed in the energy and climate sector to enable the region's economies to cope with EU climate neutrality goals, abandon fossil fuels, and make a resolute choice in favour of low-carbon energy sources. Energy transition needs to be just, inclusive, and accountable, with the EU and national parliaments playing a notable role in decision-making processes, particularly in the upcoming extension of the Energy Community Treaty. This panel will discuss the implications of the integration of the Western Balkans economies into the EU emission trading system, particularly in terms of decarbonisation policies and regulatory frameworks. Further topic of discussion will be how the Berlin

Process could provide a framework for inclusive energy transition by emphasising the stakeholders' cooperation as driving force of transition.

#### Speakers

- **Dirk Buschle**, Deputy Director and Legal Counsel, Energy Community Secretariat (TBC);
- **Marta Rufino Campos**, Policy Assistant, DG Energy (online participation);
- **Verena Allert**, Senior Advisor, German Watch;
- **Aleksandar Kovačević**, Energy Expert;
- **Ilir Bejtja**, Energy Expert;
- **Dragan Minovski**, Professor, Founder, Institute for Economic and Energy Policies and Research.

#### Moderator

- **Mirko Popović**, Programme Director, Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute

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**12:30 – 13:00** Coffee break

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**13:00 – 14:30** **Reaching Over the Digital Fence**

Antigonea 2

**How Can EU regulation Help Improve Digital Markets and Services in the Western Balkans?**

Countries in the Western Balkan region face regulatory challenges in tackling illegal and harmful content online, are unable to protect citizens rights as users and consumers and lack functional mechanisms to assure digital platforms accountability. This has created vast grey areas in the regional digital market that negatively affects media credibility and information integrity, jeopardizes democratic processes, exacerbates foreign influence operations, and creates risks for consumer safety and citizens' rights online. The panel will discuss how we can bring the region into the EU digital single market, improve digital connectivity and online safety, and introduce accountability of Very Large Online Platforms.

**Speakers**

- **Maida Ćulahović**, Head of Department, Regulatory Agency for Communications;
- **Djordje Bojović**, Western Balkans Advisor, Greens/EFA;
- **Ana Toskić Cvetinović**, Executive Director, Partners-Serbia;
- **Pjerina Gaxha**, Director, General Directorate for the Protection of Personal Data.
- **Svetlana Siljanovska**, Communications and PR associate, NATO and security affairs.

**Moderator**

- **Tijana Cvjetićanin**, Fact-checking program coordinator, Zašto Ne

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**13:00 – 14:30** **The Prospects of Mobility Driven Research and Innovation**

Antigonea 1

**How to Strengthen Western Balkans Integration into the European Research Area?**

Research and innovation (R&I) and knowledge transfer in the Western Balkans have the transformative potential of accelerating sustainable growth and convergence of our economies with the EU. This potential can be attained only if the pressing challenges of R&I and mobility-driven innovation in the Western Balkans are addressed timely, in order to catalyse regional cooperation and facilitate integration into the EU, including the European Research Area. This panel will reflect on how to strengthen the integration of the region into the European Research Area, ensuring the Western Balkan countries not only align with, but also actively collaborate with their European peers in pioneering progressive initiatives.

**Speakers**

- **Ogerta Manastirliu**, Minister of Education and Sports;
- **Bernhard Fabianek**, Senior Expert, Horizon Europe Association Unit, DG Research and Innovation;
- **Sanja Damjanović**, Scientist, GSI Helmholtz Centre for Heavy Ion Research, Darmstadt;
- **Lucian Brujan**, Science Officer, Leopoldina Academy of Science;
- **Linda Pustina**, Advisor to the Deputy Prime Minister and Head of S3 Team;
- **Anastas Mishev**, Professor of Computer Science and Engineering, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University;
- **Lisa Cowey**, Key Expert on IPR and Technology Transfer;
- **Blerjana Bino**, Executive Director, SCiDEV.

**Moderator**

- **Elvin Gjevori**, PhD, Institute of Parliamentary Research

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**14:30 – 15:30** Lunch at Rogner Hotel

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**15:30 – 17:00** **Closing Forum**

Antigonea 1 & 2

**Unlocking Progress: What's Next?**

The closing panel offers a platform for taking stock, reflecting, consolidating insights and ideas, and setting a course for future actions and potential collaborations. Speakers will provide a summary of thematic discussions and convey key messages, highlighting the importance of continued dialogue and collaboration between civil society, think tanks, and governments and EU in the region to advance the goals of the Berlin Process, including translating the recommendations into concrete actions. This panel will offer an opportunity to reflect on how the Berlin process has evolved through the years, its contribution to growth, regional cooperation and enlargement and what adjustments can be made for the Berlin Process to be fit to respond to the contemporary needs of the region, all while assuring meaningful civil society participation.

**Keynote speaker**

- **Michael Roth**, Chair of the Bundestag Foreign Affairs Committee

**Speakers**

- **Valeska Esch**, Senior Advisor to the Federal Government Special Representative for the Countries of the Western Balkans, Federal Foreign Office;
- **Bojan Marichikj**, Deputy Prime Minister, Secretariat for European Affairs;
- **Liza Gashi**, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora;
- **Hedvig Morvai**, Program Director, ERSTE Foundation;
- **Aleksander Siemaszko**, Deputy Director in Ministry of Development and Technology (online participation);
- **Marta Szpala**, Senior Fellow, Center for Eastern Studies;
- **Ardian Hackaj**, Research Director and Coordinator of Tirana Connectivity Forum, Cooperation and Development Institute.

**Moderator**

- **Una Hajdari**, Freelance Journalist

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**19:00 – 21:00 Harmonizing Nations**

**Cultural Center of the Orthodox Cathedral of Tirana, Rruga Ibrahim Rugova Nr.1, Tirana**

**Roma - The Heartbeat of Western Balkans' Unity | Concert**

An exceptional evening of unity and cultural richness at the "Cathedral of Tirana - The Resurrection of Christ." Under the evening's embrace, we present "Harmonizing Nations: Roma - The Heartbeat of Western Balkans' Unity," a symphonic masterpiece performed by the authentic Roma: The Force of Nature orchestra, authored by Bekir Haliti. This musical journey celebrates the unwavering commitment of the Open Society Foundations (OSF) to Europe, highlighting the pivotal role of Roma in the region's narrative. OSF proudly advocates for Europe's largest ethnic minority, the Roma in these transformative times.

Our concert is more than music; it's a clarion call for unity, emphasizing the essential role of Roma in shaping the Western Balkans. It's a testament to cultural diplomacy's power in European integration and our dedication to a diverse and collaborative future.

Join us as we bridge political complexities, celebrating the identities, talents, and voices enriching the Western Balkans and Europe. In this living symphony, the Roma are the pulsating heart that sustains unity.

# Session Proceedings

#CSFTirana2023

## Unlocking progress: The European Future of the Western Balkans



The opening panel discussion at the Civil Society and Think Tank Forum 2023 focused on the ongoing developments in the Western Balkan countries, encompassing both domestic and regional aspects. This panel, composed of CSO representatives, experts and key decision-makers, engaged in an examination of the challenges and opportunities that present themselves as the Western Balkans progress along the path of European Union integration and the opportunities offered by the Berlin Process.

### Key Discussion Points

**Economic Convergence and Accession Process:** The ongoing drive for economic convergence in Western Balkan countries and their EU accession process is experiencing new momentum. Panelists stressed that it is imperative to bolster the rule of law and economic development alongside ensuring the credibility of the accession process. Recent challenges, including natural disasters, the pandemic, and the war in Ukraine, highlight the need for increased attention to opening negotiating chapters and preparing for EU accession. Michela Matuella, Acting Director for the Western Balkans at Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations stressed the importance to focus on creating synergies at the regional level, to make the region more attractive on the point of view of investments, stating **“there is no point in focusing or accessing the EU single market if we haven’t harnessed the economic potential of the region.”** Speakers highlighted the significant role of the Central European Free Trade Agreement in this process, and the fresh approaches envisioned for economic convergence.

**Challenges in the Region:** Progress in the region hinges on the responsibility of leaders. Building and maintaining friendly and constructive neighboring relations is crucial. The development of a single market remains an ongoing project, with persistent issues such as unemployment and migration. Some of the panelists acknowledged that the existing financial support is insufficient to address these challenges comprehensively.

**Berlin Process's Influence on Western Balkans' EU Path:** The Berlin Process is built upon the principles of enhancing interregional cooperation, drawing the Western Balkans closer to the EU, fostering good neighboring relations, and promoting regional ownership. The process of EU accession should not be limited to political leaders but should also involve parliament, civil society, youth, and businesses. Michael Reiffenstuel, Director for the Western Balkans at the German Federal Foreign Office stated “...if we are speaking of a process like getting toward the European Union, this is not only the task of politicians, but it needs consolidated efforts of politics, of parliamentarians, of executives. It needs also the support of civil society and youth”. Their active participation can drive government reforms forward. Stressing the importance of CSF 2023, Odeta Barbullushi, Advisor to the Prime Minister of Albania stressed that the Albanian governments, as organizers of this year's summit “...have had some very good recommendations, some very good reports already from the civil society organizations which we will integrate in the discussions of the leaders, and I think that is the benefit of such a forum”.

**Growth Plan and the Regional Market:** The growth plan proposed in Bratislava aims to address the substantial GDP gap and expedite economic development. Initiatives like the Common Regional Market and the growth plan complement, rather than substitute, the accession process. Odeta Barbullushi, Advisor to the Albanian Prime Minister on Western Balkans & EU affairs explained that “**the whole package includes economic enhancement instruments, deepening regional cooperation, accelerating reforms and closer political cooperation**”. On regional economic cooperation, Majlinda Bregu, Secretary General, Regional Cooperation Council stated that “**the story of the common regional market, born three years ago, couldn't be an accomplished task. It is going to take a lot of time to become the most viable instrument for deepening the economic integration of the region**”. Creating a single economic space in the Western Balkans is imperative, as individual markets are relatively small. Accessing the EU market is only meaningful when a regional market is in place.

**Political Will and EU Requirements:** The EU and candidate countries alike need to fulfill their respective responsibilities. There is a mutual commitment to accelerating the accession process. Donika Emini, Executive Director at CiviKos highlighted the importance of political will on both sides, stating “**financial incentives are important for the democratic transformation of the region, but is not that simple. First of all is whether there is a will for enlargement from the EU side and a will from the countries to actually implement the reforms that are needed for integration**”. Candidate countries must make informed political decisions and invest in the technical aspects of the process. Fundamental criteria, including economic performance, the rule of law, anti-corruption measures, economic development, and the effectiveness of public services, are of paramount importance. Civil society plays a significant role in monitoring progress and advocating for leadership accountability. The implementation of reforms may pose challenges for leaders with vested interests in corruption. Milka Tadić Mijović, President of the Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro focused on the challenging democratic transformation of the region stating that “**the region faces deep structural problems, we have never actually ended this transition from autocracy to democracy and this the major problem of the region. The role of the EU in this transition is for me the key issue**”.



Governments must prepare their societies for transformation and not simply create pro-EU narratives, which is losing traction in some Western Balkans countries. In contrast, countries like Ukraine and Moldova exhibit higher motivation to implement reforms.

The session's final message emphasized that, despite the existing challenges, there is a shared political determination for the future of the Western Balkans within the European Union, and both parties must now fulfill their respective obligations.

## The Politics of Enlargement: How to Seize the New Momentum?



The discussion on this panel focused on delving into various strategies and potential approaches within the framework of EU enlargement. The panelists discussed how different actors can harness the new momentum in the context of EU enlargement and ensure sustainability of this drive to bring about a transformative change in the Western Balkans. The discussion extended to how governments can closely align themselves with the EU accession process and emphasized the region's responsibility in addressing longstanding, critical issues that may have been neglected in the past due to political factors.

### Key Discussion Points

**Transformation potential of the Enlargement Process:** The enlargement process, once viewed as a tool for instigating reforms and positive changes, has evolved into a management mechanism. Despite a new dynamic in the context of the Ukrainian war, tangible progress has yet to be seen. Focusing on accountability, Nikola Dimitrov, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia stated that **“European help, in terms of a process that is credible, is indispensable for us to make it and fix our problems. But they cannot deliver if we don't have domestic efforts, islands of integrity, a coalition of citizens, and hopefully political players that will push in the right direction against corruption for free media and strong institutions, not captured institutions”**. The debate surrounding internal reforms, the expansion of EU membership, and the concept of European integration without full membership was highlighted. It was stressed that safeguarding the integrity of the accession process and the Copenhagen criteria from unrelated issues is of utmost importance.

**Role of Governments in the Integration Process:** The relationship between politicians, citizens, and the EU was examined at a time when there is a fear of renewed violence in the region. The discussion underscored the close link between Western Balkans' EU membership and reforms within the EU. Speakers placed emphasis on the notion that EU membership isn't solely a concern for the current governments but also for future administrations that come into power and have the willingness to leverage EU dynamics and instruments for the benefit of the Western Balkans. On this point, Ditmir Bushati, former Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania stated that **“we are living in a comfort zone where,**

basically, there are lots of discussions about leaders and strong leaders. There is little discussion about governments, societies, human rights, the rule of law, and democracy”. Supporting and empowering these future governments and political figures was deemed particularly significant.

**Kosovo-Serbia Relations:** Participants questioned the need for a special EU envoy for Kosovo and Serbia, drawing parallels with other regions such as the Middle East, South Africa, and Latin America. Concerns were raised about the mixed messages this might send to the Western Balkans. The idea of appeasing Serbia to foster EU alignment was challenged, as EU membership should ideally facilitate the transformation of adversaries into neighbors, which is not the case with Kosovo and Serbia. Instead, a unified EU approach was advocated to motivate both countries to engage in the resolution process.

**Recommendations on Enlargement Policy:** Speakers engaged in discussion on possible reforms in enlargement policy. It was proposed to accelerate EU accession and simplify decision-making in the EU Council to prevent member states from vetoing intermediate steps in the process. The idea of reintroducing country-specific accession action plans with clear timetables and specific milestones, incentives and rewards for countries making progress on reforms, was put forward. As highlighted by Ana Krstinovska, ELIAMEP Researcher and President of ESTIMA, “**the process should not be open-ended, it should be definite, and different countries should have an idea of what the best-case scenario is for them to finally join the EU. They should have a timeline with concrete deliverables, and if they deliver on time on each of these deliverables, they should be able to join the EU by the year x y**”. The need to separate enlargement from political issues related to bilateral disputes was emphasized, with a call to resolve these disputes in parallel rather than within the accession process. This approach would streamline and expedite the enlargement process, focusing primarily on the reforms necessary for EU integration.

The key message conveyed during the session revolved around the new momentum in enlargement policy, catalyzed by the war of aggression in Ukraine, which has fundamentally reshaped the EU's perspective on the accession process. Adnan Ćerimagić, Senior Analyst for the Western Balkans at the European Stability Initiative states that “the big question, for me, is not how the Western Balkans can seize the new momentum. It's about how the EU can keep the momentum that has been created in Ukraine and Moldova. And I'm afraid if we look at the debates inside the EU at the moment, we are on the brink of actually losing that momentum, not keeping that momentum”. Speakers also concluded by highlighting that it is now incumbent upon Western Balkans governments to also take the lead in executing the necessary structural reforms, as these reforms are intricately intertwined with the overall accession process.

## Breaking Barriers to Regional Security Cooperation

### How to Address Trust Issues Among Security Institutions in the Western Balkans?



The panel on security, consisting of experts and policymakers from the Western Balkans analyzed the state of regional security cooperation, addressed trust issues among security institutions, and underscored the geopolitical importance of the region and its path towards the European Union.

#### Key Discussion Points

**Geopolitical Shifts and European Integration:** The panel initiated its deliberations by recognizing the profound impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which had a transformative effect on geopolitical dynamics. The panelists recognized that the war in Ukraine has reinvigorated efforts to draw the Western Balkans closer to the European Union. Taulant Balla, Minister of Internal Affairs of Albania stressed the importance of the Berlin Process in strengthening regional cooperation efforts. He stated **“the genesis of the Berlin Process in 2014 was based on the need to strengthen cooperation among the six Western Balkan countries, and since the very beginning, there have been these two goals: first, to improve communication, and second, to liberalize the movement of people, goods, and capitals. The model of inspiration that comes from the genesis of the European Union”**. The panel explored strategies to enhance trust and collaboration among regional security institutions, stressing that effective security cooperation must be seen as central to the integration process.

**Kosovo Security Situation and Unresolved Bilateral Disputes:** The discussion raised concerns about the deteriorating security situation in Kosovo and escalating ethnic tensions, particularly in the wake of a terrorist attack in September 2023. Xhelal Sveçla, Minister of Internal Affairs of Kosovo raised concerns on the lack of cooperation on security matters, focusing on Kosovo – Serbia relations by stressing that **“this positioning of Serbia is dangerous not only for Kosovo but also for peace and stability in the region and beyond”**. Several panel members emphasized the urgency of addressing the threat of instability. Unresolved bilateral disputes, notably the lack of progress in normalizing relations between Kosovo and Serbia, posed a substantial obstacle to regional cooperation and integration.

Both governments in the region and the EU were urged to prioritize investments in reconciliation. Participants advocated for the creation of a dedicated European Union facility to facilitate grassroots reconciliation efforts within the Western Balkans. It was further emphasized that political leaders must alter their rhetoric and promote messages of reconciliation, as Ramadan Ilazi, Head of Research at the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies states **“we appeal to leaders to have more reconciliatory messages because the rhetoric is really translating into concrete security concerns for the community”**.

**Irregular Migration:** The Western Balkans continues to be exploited as a route for irregular migration into the European Union. Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro have had effective police cooperation protocols in place since 2018 to combat various forms of transnational crime and irregular migration. Josip Brkić, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, focusing on some positive achievements in the region regarding cross border cooperation stressed that **“this political momentum needs to be taken in order to fulfill, of course, the Thessaloniki promise, but also to stabilize the entire political situation in the region of Southeast Europe.”** The presence of Frontex in the region was deemed significant to counter irregular migration.

**Democracy's Impact on Regional Security:** The commitment of Western Balkan governments to democratic values and principles was identified as crucial for enhancing regional cooperation and integration. Concerns were raised about autocratic tendencies and limited media freedom in the region, which were seen as undermining both European and regional integration. As stated by Sonja Stojanović Gajić, Independent Consultant **“the worst scenario is not that we continue as we are doing, for me, the worst scenario is that, on paper, we look good and integrate well, implement the common economic area, implement security and integration, but stay without democracy and without dealing with everyday concerns of safety and rights of people”**. The panel also examined the issue of malign foreign influence and how organized corruption and corrosive capital facilitate such influence.

**Cybersecurity:** Cyberthreats pose a significant challenge to all Western Balkan countries. A proactive early warning system for cyberthreats was deemed essential, achievable only through a collaborative approach from the Western Balkans. The establishment of a Center for Cybersecurity Capacity Building in the Western Balkans in Montenegro, supported by France and Slovenia, was mentioned as a step in the right direction. Integration of the Western Balkans into the work of the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) and the EU Cybersecurity Incident Review Mechanism was considered highly important.

**Inclusive Regional Security Cooperation Initiatives:** The discussion highlighted the numerous regional initiatives for cooperation in the Western Balkans, noting that they often lacked inclusivity and focus. The absence of Kosovo's participation in many of these regional initiatives was identified as a significant concern for overall regional security cooperation.

**Collaboration with European Institutions:** The panel stressed the importance of collaboration agreements with the European Public Prosecutor's Office and called for the swift conclusion of cooperation agreements by all Western Balkan countries. Furthermore, Western Balkans countries were encouraged to fully align with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and their visa policies with the EU's Schengen Zone.

**Media and Disinformation:** The role of the media in disseminating disinformation was emphasized, and a collective approach to addressing media-related challenges was underscored as a pressing need.

The panel emphasized that key factors to security include fostering regional cooperation, active engagement from the European Union, capitalizing on the renewed momentum for enlargement, and effectively addressing security and justice concerns. These elements collectively play a pivotal role in advancing the overall well-being and stability of the Western Balkans region.

## Full Access to the EU Single Market as a Pathway to Prosperity:

### Can the Western Balkans Achieve Seamless Integration?



This panel addressed questions of whether the Western Balkans can achieve seamless integration to the EU Single Market, how access to the EU single market can influence the progress of the countries, and the importance of regional cooperation in the path to joining the European Union and achieving economic development of the region.

#### Key Discussion Points

**Access to the Single Market:** What is expected from the EU is a strategy with a workable schedule for equitable access to the single market across all sectors that will not impose high adjustment costs and are beneficial for citizens and companies. Countries should also be provided with time for proper preparation and access to the single market requires engagement not just from political leadership, but also on administrative and parliamentary level. Stefan Ristovski, Researcher at the European Policy Institute also **called for caution, as access to the single market does not in itself increase competitiveness and complete access, without proper levels of preparedness, may harm Western Balkan economies.** In this context, the EU should increase available funds to facilitate the transition. Access to the single market should be tied to the implementation of the common regional market, should be incremental and conditioned by rule of law, as EU membership is supposed to be transformational, not transactional. The EU's economic governance processes and mechanisms should also be implemented in the Western Balkans, guiding governments how to streamline funds in support of structural reforms and holding them accountable for how the funds are spent.

**EU Convergence:** Achieving convergence with the EU is a long-term endeavor that may span several decades. To align their GDP with EU standards, countries must undertake substantial efforts. This involves developing human capital and bolstering institutions, citizens, and societies to adhere to the EU's standards and core values, but also adopting the *acquis*. Pranvera Kastrati, Senior Connectivity Expert at the Regional Cooperation Council stressed that **while there is optimism in the region regarding EU integration, there is a need to build trust with citizens through tangible results. Convergence with the EU may take several decades, up to 70 years.** To achieve this, we must focus on key alignment and improving our capacities to absorb what's happening in the EU. World Bank studies have shown

that if there is deepening of CEFTA [countries' preferential trade agreements] to the level of access to the single market, the GDP could be boosted up to 7.6%, which if linked to the single market can go up to 15%.

**CEFTA's Role in Access to the Single Market:** CEFTA's main objective, is to integrate its members into the EU, including assuring access to EU's single market. For Zdravko Ilić, Senior Expert on Trade in Services at CEFTA, **the Commission's new Growth Plan is highly anticipated, but also a kind of overdue promise and he hopes the new Growth Plan will "pass the citizens and businesses test", bringing visible, tangible, and recognizable benefits, which was not the case with the concepts such as phasing in during negotiations or the economic and investment plan.** Access to the single market is a two-way highway, so countries need to prepare their economies and business communities to be able to sustain the pressure from the market competition in the EU. To address political blockages in CEFTA, a fresh approach is necessary, focusing on structural improvements, redefining EU integration, and enabling access to the single market.

**Importance of Regional Integration for Access to the Single Market:** The Berlin Process promotes unity and equal treatment of members in the region. Nenad Djurdjević, Director at the Regional Center for Strategic and Political Initiatives stresses that **"it is important to notice that EU integration and regional cooperation should be two parallel efforts that go hand in hand side by side, not separate efforts"**. Governments must implement policies that positively impact the lives of their citizens, as EU integration holds great promise for the region. Countries in the region also need to merge efforts to establish institutions that can support the flow of goods, and which are not political in their nature, such as accreditation bodies, regional laboratories etc.

**Approximation with the EU Acquis:** The region has made progress in approximating legislation to EU standards, but it is essential to ensure that these standards are effectively applied. Jorida Tabaku, Chairwoman of the European Affair Committee and Chairwoman of the National Council of European Integration in Albania stressed the importance of the role of Parliaments in the Berlin Process. She however **warned the process has been very political and government oriented, lacking prior deliberation and transparency.** Not all countries have the same foundation when discussing economic reforms and growth plans. Upholding the rule of law is a prerequisite for economic reforms in the internal market.

**Importance of Regional Cooperation in the EU Path:** Recent incidents, such as those in Kosovo, highlight the importance of security alongside the political component in EU integration. Jeton Zulfaj, Political Advisor, Office of the Prime Minister of Kosovo stressed that **"...if the EU is ready by 2030 to accept us, because they have to be ready first, then we will need at least 10% growth to close the gap that we have in terms of convergence with the EU ...we are not going to do that if we just continue to block each other and continue to look backwards"**. Individual countries negotiate their unique paths to the EU, but regional integration should complement these efforts.



**Role of Academia and Civil Society:** Civil society and academia should advocate for more specific guidance in areas where progress can be accelerated. Silvana Mojsovska, Full-time Professor at the Institute of Economics stressed **that in order to have good results to report next year, support is needed from all available resources, and many of them work at academia.** Strengthening the connection between academia and EU integration and encouraging civil society to actively participate and provide input is vital for the region's development.

The overarching message conveyed in this panel underscores the profound importance of regional collaboration over individual efforts. By pooling collective resources and concentrating efforts on working harmoniously, regional actors and the EU can effectively mitigate challenges and direct energies toward the systematic dismantling of barriers that hinder progress in the region.

## Greening the Western Balkans:

### Uniting for Sustainable Infrastructure, Biodiversity Protection, and Effective Governance



The panel brought together decision-makers and specialists to address the Western Balkan countries' progress in meeting European Union requirements related to the Green Agenda. The panellists explored key issues relating to green infrastructure, environmental conservation, and governance in the Western Balkans, while discussing strategies for a sustainable and environmentally responsible future in the region.

#### Key Discussion Points

**Sustainable Energy:** The Western Balkan countries, apart from some progress in Albania, are facing challenges in transitioning to greener energy production. There's a significant focus on achieving climate neutrality by 2050, a formidable goal that poses substantial investment and capacity challenges. Sabit Gashi, Acting Director of the Department of Energy, Ministry of Economy of Kosovo stresses that **“it is very important that the projects which have a green component are qualified for funding, and we have seen very, very good projects on district heating based on renewables”**, emphasizing investments in energy efficiency and district heating systems as potential solutions to accelerate progress.

**Effective Governance:** Building institutional capacities is imperative for establishing effective governance in Western Balkan countries. Strengthening human capacities is essential to optimize the utilization of EU pre-accession funds, particularly for environmentally friendly projects. The discussion underscores the need for regional initiatives with projects of regional significance and the establishment of a regional hub for project programming and administration. Radica Koceva, IPA Management Expert stressed that it is crucial to **further enhance aid support to the Western Balkan countries by establishing a funding mechanism built on solidarity and multi-level governance**. She called for a new financial instrument, akin to cohesion funds, to replace the current pre-accession assistance mechanism.

**Environmental Priority:** Investments are urgently needed in vital sectors such as healthcare, education, and transportation, which are central to citizens' well-being.

These investments place a significant burden on the state budget, necessitating revenue generation from the broader economy through taxation. Balancing economic development with environmental protection is of paramount importance. Johannes Heidecker, Advisor to the Prime Minister of North Macedonia stressed the crucial importance of human capital and management capacities, **focusing on the need for Western Balkan countries to bolster their investment management capabilities to fully harness available funds.**

**Preserving Biodiversity:** Biodiversity in the Western Balkan region is undervalued and requires immediate attention. Enhancing the management plans for protected areas is essential, aligning them with EU Acquis standards. Ensuring the sustainability of biodiversity projects, particularly regarding covering operational costs, is a critical consideration. Mirjam de Koning, Executive Director at Prespa-Ohrid Nature Trust stated that **“the Western Balkan countries have such a high biodiversity, they completely underestimate the value of the wealth of natural resources they possess, which is the foundation of your economies... so really, all sectors should invest in biodiversity”.** Notably, protected areas in the Western Balkan do not generate revenue, necessitating state investment in operational costs and staff. A focus on nurturing a new generation of young professionals dedicated to biodiversity protection is seen as a potential accelerator for conservation efforts.

**Community Engagement:** The importance of state engagement with local communities and its significance to the well-being of the local population was underscored. It is imperative for state engagement to be straightforward and easily comprehensible to local communities for them to accept and support these initiatives. While CSOs are actively involved with local communities, their impact is limited, primarily due to their dependence on donor funding for project-based activities, as Petrica Dulgheru, Chairman of the Board at the Roma Economic Development Initiative highlighted **“...we speak about engaging with the community, we speak about engaging with the government, and we speak about engaging with the European Commission, but many of the CSOs that I know do not have financial stability to do all that”.**

**Funding and Investment:** The establishment and role of the ECO FUND in Montenegro were elaborated upon by Draško Boljević, Executive Director of the Eco Fund, **who focused particularly in its role in securing funding for environmental initiatives.** The ECO FUND in Montenegro has supported various initiatives, including aid to non-governmental organizations, subsidies to citizens for installing photovoltaic systems in their homes, and assistance to national authorities in waste management and green space projects. As the only ECO FUND in the Western Balkans, the experiences gained in Montenegro have the potential to be beneficial in other Western Balkan countries for fostering sustainable environmental initiatives. The concluding messages from the session outlined several critical outcomes that stakeholders aspire to achieve in the implementation of the Green Agenda over the next five years. A primary objective is to substantially reduce dependency on coal by 35%. This ambitious target reflects the urgency of transitioning to cleaner and more sustainable energy sources. Another key goal is to establish efficient and eco-friendly bus and train systems in Western Balkan countries.

Enhancing public transportation can help reduce reliance on individual vehicles and promote eco-friendly travel options. Commitment to embracing the principles of a circular economy includes minimizing waste, reusing resources, and recycling materials to promote sustainability and minimize environmental impact. A significant milestone for Western Balkan countries is to align environmental regulations and standards with EU requirements, signifying a step towards harmonizing environmental practices . An essential objective is to acknowledge the undervalued biodiversity in the Western Balkans and take measures to protect and sustain it.

## A process that delivers: Enhancing the Berlin Process through Accountability Mechanisms



The focal point of the panel's discussions was identifying innovative approaches, mechanisms, and methods to enhance the accountability of the Berlin Process, with the aim of achieving more effective outcomes in promoting positive change. The panel brought together parliamentarians, experts, and media representatives to explore accountability aspects and share insights on how accountability can strengthen commitments, transparency, and the success of the Berlin Process in areas like regional stability, economic development, and political cooperation.

### Key Discussion Points

**The Parliamentary Dimension in the Berlin Process:** The Berlin Process has taken a significant step towards greater parliamentary involvement with the adoption of a declaration during the conference of chairs of committees for European affairs in Tirana. This initiative aims to enhance the active participation of parliaments in the process to ensure that Members of Parliament are adequately informed about policies and agreements. Arbër Ademi, Chairperson of the European Affairs Committee at the Assembly of North Macedonia stressed that **“accountability should be on the heart of our efforts... we must establish clear benchmarks and a monitoring process to follow the progress in different areas such as rule of law, democracy, economic reforms, regional cooperation, and these mechanisms should be transparent, independent and impartial”**. These monitoring mechanisms should be characterized by transparency, independence, and impartiality.

**Holding Governments Accountable in the Berlin Process:** The parliamentary dimension assumes greater significance in the Berlin Process during its implementation phase, ultimately benefiting citizens and various stakeholders, including civil society, businesses, the European Union, and political leaders in the region. To ensure accountability, official procedures are needed to endorse the results of monitoring exercises within the process. It is essential to make these results accessible to the broader public to maintain transparency and inform citizens about the level of implementation. Viktoria Voglsinger-Palm, Deputy Director, Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft e.V stated that while **“we can have a technical report for the EU Member States and for governments, we need an easier message somehow for the broader public because the broader public will**

be those who bring the pressure from below to the government's implementation... but for that, they need to understand what has been signed, what has been committed to, and what it means for them themselves". It is important to address the shortcomings of public consultations at the national level, where parliamentary amendments are often ignored. It is unrealistic to expect that the regional level will adopt everything produced at the national level. Civil society invests significant resources in the process, while governments need to increase their commitment. Aleksandra Tomanić, Executive Director of the European Fund for the Balkans stressed that **"...some sort of a monitoring mechanism, accountability mechanism would at least make government lip service impossible, or traceable, or visible to everyone."** Policymakers in the Western Balkans should play a central role in discussing process efficiency, enhancing accountability, and setting clear and realistic goals with defined timelines for implementation.

**The Role of Media:** Media plays a crucial role in promoting accountability in the Berlin Process. However, there is often a disconnect between media coverage and public understanding of the process. Adelheid Feilcke, Director of Programs for Europe, Deutsche Welle stressed that the process **"is too abstract; it is too far away from people's reality... and when we talk about the accountability of the Berlin Process, 99% of the population doesn't understand what we are talking about."** Panelists discussed the necessity to increase the number of journalists reporting on the process and promote more integrated regional networking among media outlets. Civil society forums and organizations can facilitate this process by fostering communication and understanding among different countries in the Western Balkans. To bridge the gap, representatives from various organizations should share concrete stories and information to enable journalists to report effectively.

**A Methodology for Monitoring the Process:** A comprehensive methodology for monitoring the Berlin Process involves the active participation of civil society in the Western Balkans. Fatjona Mejdini, Director of the Southeastern Europe Observatory, Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime highlighted the concern of how to handle the accountability building process. According to her **the first step involves the policymakers in the Western Balkans, by establishing clear and tangible goals to follow within the process itself.** Geron Kamberi, Independent Expert stated that a monitoring mechanism would provide civil society in the Western Balkans with a platform to assess how governments are approaching the Berlin Process commitment and engagement. Such a mechanism would help the process maintain transparency and accountability.

The key messages communicated by the panel highlighted the pivotal significance of the Berlin Process in the Western Balkans. The successful implementation of this process necessitates a implementation of this process necessitates a holistic strategy that engages parliamentary bodies, civil society, media, and establishes robust accountability mechanisms. Improving transparency and fostering effective communication are imperative to ensure that the BerlinProcess delivers tangible benefits to all the citizens in the region.

The commitment of all stakeholders, including governments, is essential for realizing the process's objectives and facilitating regional progress.

## Freedom?

### The European Destiny of the Western Balkans



Conversation with Lea Ypi, Professor in Political Theory, London School of Economics, led by Igor Štiks, Professor, Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University.

**Search for freedom:** Freedom is not a set of laws and rules that give you access to opportunities, rights, and entitlements, its actually the search for freedom. You can also be free when you are oppressed outside, as in that moment you know something is wrong with the world you live in, and you are constantly questioning it. Our internal freedom can be challenged when we have most external freedom, as then we think our internal and external life are somehow reflecting each other and therefore we don't need to question ourselves anymore. When we start taking for granted the world we live in, that's when we lose our intellectual power and critical capacities.

**Failure of the nation state:** The democratic revolutions of 1848 rested on the idea that popular sovereignty will bring people closer to power and control those in power. But in the world we live in today, ultimately the most important decisions are driven by economic decisions and constrains, where you can question everything other than the economic system you live in. Reconceiving the nation state in more imaginative ways and rethinking citizenship is not possible under a capitalist framework.

**Dissident tradition in Eastern Europe, Albania and Yugoslavia:** In these parts, even if there wasn't open dissent, there was a spirit of dissent and people found imaginative ways of expressing opposition. But in the transition, we lost the fact that this experience was brought through dissident movements which wanted democracy understood as a type of rule that enables you to channel your critical thinking in a certain way and asks questions. But someone from the outside defined and shaped what people wanted or were searching for. Now, we need to reappropriate the capacity to rethink democracy, through the failures of the historical models, liberal capitalism and state socialism and regain our ability to speak from the margins of Europe.

**Critique of the left:** Nationalism is not only problem of right-wing movements. Both Western and Eastern left-wing political parties during their development in



the 20th century, have appropriated the nation and the nation state as a framework for mobilization. The transition between the revolutionary left-wing movements and the reformist left, happened when the later adopted the understanding that through citizenship, expansion of the franchise through voting rights, people will become agents, and the state is the framework that provides that agency. In this way the left has become complicit and lost its transnational project.

**EU is reproducing and expanding the nation state framework:** EU is a neoliberal project that reproduces the same nation state framework, on a larger scale. It uses the same border management logic, the same patterns of citizenship, the same kind of exclusion that you would find in a nation state. So instead of having smaller nation states, you have a larger one which has more mobility opportunities for the people in it. The EU is not a pioneer to rethink transnational citizenship or representation in the 21st century.

**The problem with EU enlargement discourse:** Regenerating the politics in EU starts by admitting that the project is open and looks like it's going in the wrong direction. But it can be reshaped, one way to do so is by introducing proper mechanisms of decision making and participation of citizens and civil society. It's important to reappropriate the discourse of agency, rather than leave the public space to European enlargement technocrats.

**Critique of Pure Reason:** From a critical scholar perspective, reason is both a source of uncertainty and source of doubt. And reason has two enemies: skepticism and dogmatism. We shouldn't have a final platform, a final goal or a definite vision of where it is we want to go. What we need is a robust, coherent and inclusive critique and from that criticism, solutions will emerge.

Tirana, October 15, 2023

## Challenging 'the Lack of Administrative Capacities' Narrative:

### How Can the Western Balkans Absorb More EU Funding?



The discussion on this panel addressed questions regarding the capacities of the Western Balkans to absorb more funding from the European Union. Composed of CSO representatives, experts and key decision-maker, this panel focused on examining possibilities and challenges to funding which could facilitate the economic convergence and support EU accession.

#### Key Discussion Points

**Size of EU funds and modalities of instruments:** The region already has a certain form of facilitated market integration with the EU, but it receives disproportionate support for the costs it bears. The announced increase of funds within the existing MFF was welcomed by the panelist, but they called for more transparency. Simonida Kacarska, Director of the European Policy Institute, stressed that **“the modalities of implementation often do not support the building of the institutional structures in the candidate countries along the lines of future EU member states, so we need to streamline as much as we can the procedures for using the instrument for pre-accession assistance to mirror the use of the structural and cohesion funds.”** Tanja Mišćević, Minister of European Integration of Serbia agreed that for the next MFF there should be a dedicated line to enlargement, meaning funds available for potential new member states.

**Administrative Capacity is Key:** Countries like Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia offer valuable insights into the potential economic growth that comes with membership, but also the challenges that one could encounter along the way. Initially Romania and Bulgaria struggled to absorb funds, with Bulgaria losing some pre-accession funds due to underutilization. Ambre Maucorps, Economist at the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies stressed **that administrative capacity is key, but also warned that countries shouldn't rush unprepared into absorption of EU funds, as in case of fraud or irregularities, states will not be refunded and bear the costs themselves, which could damage economic growth.**

**Involvement of Civil Society:** There is lack of political will on side of governments to implement existing legal standards and practices that would assure genuine and effective involvement of civil society in the accession process.

But there is also lack of action from EU, which fails to put pressure over governments to include civil society, despite knowing that their participation in programming, implementation, and monitoring can enhance effectiveness, accountability and transparency of the funding. Anja Bosilkova-Antovska, Head of Advocacy, Balkan Civil Society Development Network stressed that **having the expertise is not enough when CSOs are struggling for funding, and aside from EU funding, public funding in the Western Balkans is absolutely not effective and does not support these activities as it is largely unavailable for organizations dealing with rule of law and democracy watchdog organizations.**

**Energy Transition and the Need for Transparency:** The energy transition, as one of the policies that require largest investments, is also not immune to lack of transparency and unavailability of information. There have already been cases where EU funds were used to support fossil fuel development, were benefiting state owned companies at the expense of municipalities or were supporting policies which did not have a long term effect. Damir Miljević, Member of Managing Board of RESET stressed that **the energy transition is a critical topic that will shape the next 15 years and is of growing importance, as most people will be affected by challenges in the energy sector.** In addition, civil society organizations that deal with energy policies, need constant institutional development, as gaps in knowledge are often used as an excuse by governments to exclude them from the processes.

**Activation of Capacities:** In April 2011, ministers from Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia petitioned EU commissioners for a more streamlined financing approach, greater alignment between IPA and structural funds, and increased funding. It's concerning that similar requests are still relevant 12 years later. While capacities exist, the challenge lies in activating and synchronizing them effectively. EU accession hinges on political commitment. Drita Abdiu Halili, State Secretary and Deputy Chief Negotiator with the EU for the Government of North Macedonia highlighted **the need to include all stakeholders in the process and communicate to the wider public that process of accession and assistance go together and are complimentary to each other, as accession needs to be followed by financial support.** Capacities reside within civil society organizations and consultative services, and the focus should be on finding ways to contribute collaboratively.

The insights shared during the panel discussion underscore the paramount importance of aligning regional efforts with EU policies, bolstering administrative capacity, fostering transparency in the allocation of funds, and actively engaging civil society organizations in decision-making and monitoring processes. These key points emphasize the intricate nature of the EU accession process, where cooperation among neighboring countries, the development of administrative capabilities, open and equitable distribution of financial resources, and the active participation of civil society are pivotal factors in advancing toward EU membership.

## Towards a Just and Inclusive Energy Transition: Accountability and Oversight of the Western Balkans Energy Sector



During this panel discussion, a diverse group of CSO representatives, experts and decision-makers came together to address some of the most pressing issues related to energy transition in the Western Balkans. The central themes that dominated the discourse revolved around the pivotal subjects of energy transition, accountability, and oversight within the energy sector of the Western Balkans. The panel's collective expertise and deliberations aimed to shed light on these crucial issues, exploring potential solutions and strategies to drive sustainable and responsible energy development in the region.

### Key Discussion Points

**Rule of Law and Treaty Compliance:** There are obstacles in applying the principle of the rule of law and ensuring compliance with the provisions of the Energy Community Treaty. Mirko Popović, Programme Director at Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute focused precisely on these issues by stressing that **“the energy transition is stuck in the Western Balkan region... we face the issue of the implementation of the rule of law principle... we face the issue of noncompliance with the treaty establishing the Energy Community...”**. Non-compliance leads to air pollution and violations of human rights related to health and sustainable environment. Aleksandar Kovačević, Energy Expert called for **the European Union to stand strongly behind rule of law by calling for commitment to uphold the Energy Community Treaty, and to address energy challenges also in the rule of law chapter of the country reports.**

**Inclusive Debate:** To address these challenges, it is crucial to engage in inclusive debates that evaluate both the achievements and obstacles in implementing the Energy Community Treaty. Dragan Minovski, Professor and Founder of the Institute for Economic and Energy Policies and Research stressed the importance **of the democratization of the energy process and including citizens in the energy transition process, as final beneficiaries.** Panellists also discussed the need for a European Commission assessment report, which should be presented and discussed with the EU institutions, national parliaments, and civil society.

**Western Balkans Integration into EU ETS and the Legacy Coal Power Plants:** Integrating the Western Balkans countries into the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) is proposed as the most feasible option for decarbonization. Prioritizing the reduction of energy poverty and providing support to vulnerable consumers is essential, as energy poverty contributes to high energy consumption and grid losses, affecting the decarbonization of the electricity sector. Dirk Buschle, Deputy Director and Legal Counsel at Energy Community Secretariat stressed that **despite an increase in renewable energy sources, the region still faces challenges related to old coal power plants, which do not comply with environmental standards and pose a physical problem that can often be addressed by the energy community only through soft tools, due to the economic advantage they offer to their operators.** Addressing energy poverty through social measures is important, but low incentive processes hinder investment in energy efficiency.

**Financing Challenges:** Financing remains a significant issue, both in the EU and the region. Marta Rufino Campos, Policy Assistant at DG Energy stressed that for **the green transition, the European Union continuously supports the region, especially its efforts to diversify its energy supply to reduce its dependence on fossil fuels and achieve long-term growth.** The EU has provided financial support and introduced the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) to incentivize transition. However, there may be consequences for not embracing the transition, emphasizing the need for discussions on carbon pricing.

**Energy Security:** Recent energy crises and geopolitical tensions have highlighted the importance of the energy transition in strengthening the energy system and enhancing energy security. Verena Allert, Senior Advisor at German Watch stressed that **while enlargement is crucial and imminent for the region, a stronger emphasis must be made on the energy transition, which cannot wait.** The Energy Community signatories have adopted 2030 energy and climate targets, focusing on energy efficiency and renewable energy penetration. National energy and climate plans of Western Balkan countries must align with these targets.

**Regional Climate Partnership:** Strong commitments are expected from the EU and Germany in supporting the energy transition in the region. The regional climate partnership between the German federal government and the region is a significant step forward, emphasizing Germany's commitment. Panellists stressed that **by integrating electricity markets and finding joint solutions for the challenges, the region stands a good chance to staying afloat in the transition.** However, greater transparency is needed on the specifics of this partnership and how civil society can contribute.

**Impact on Consumers:** The energy transition has a direct impact on energy consumers, many of whom face poverty and difficulties in accessing energy. Ilir Bejtja, Energy Expert stresses that **it is essential to implement measures, following guidance from the Energy Community, to reduce energy poverty and ensure access to energy for all citizens, especially those in vulnerable situations.**

On this session, panellists stressed that Western Balkans face a multitude of obstacles on their path towards energy transition. However, a collective determination exists to confront these hurdles through cooperative efforts, adherence to legal principles, and a robust partnership with the European Union and its member states. Tackling issues like energy poverty and advancing the utilization of renewable energy sources are pivotal objectives in the region's pursuit of a sustainable and forward-looking energy landscape. True efforts in energy transition will contribute to the region's sustainable future and its EU accession process.

## Reaching Over the Digital Fence:

### How Can EU regulation Help Improve Digital Markets and Services in the Western Balkans?



The panel on digitalization brought together key experts and decision-makers to tackle the question of how European Union regulations can play a pivotal role in enhancing digital markets and services within the Western Balkans. The primary focus of their conversation revolved around the practical steps required to effectively implement the recommendations put forth by the working groups engaged with CSF 2023.

#### Key Discussion Points

**Implementing EU legislation:** The best practice for the Western Balkan countries would be to transpose EU legislation to their respective laws. However, the legislation needs to be adjusted to the local legal framework. Pjerina Gaxha, Director of the General Directorate for the Protection of Personal Data of Albania informed that Albania is going through a very serious process on how to implement GDPR provisions - **“this is not only a matter of willingness but also an obligation we have in the process of integration in the European Union”**. It is also necessary to think about the implementation mechanisms once the law is adopted. Thinking about the EU legislation, Western Balkan countries need to consider how it is going to affect their citizens. Ana Toskić Cvetinović, Executive Director at Partners-Serbia shared the Serbian experience as a positive one - **“I think Serbia took the harmonization issue very seriously when it came to GDPR, because we literally translated GDPR and put it in our law and personal data protection.”**

**Western Balkans as a Part of the Digital Single Market:** To become part of the Digital Single Market (DSM), Western Balkan countries must formally express their interest in joining this market. The European Commission should provide financial and technical support to help the region meet the necessary standards, including full membership in existing programs and funds. To effectively implement the DSA, a single point of contact and a coordinator should be designated within each Western Balkan country. Maida Ćulahović, Head of Department of the Regulatory Agency for Communications of BiH stresses that **inclusion of Western Balkans will depend on the European Commission itself, especially whether Western Balkans will have the possibility to participate in the European board for digital services, which is similar to the GDPR.**

These roles and the means of cooperation should be clearly defined in the establishing act of the Digital Services Coordinator (DSC). Cooperation models from the EU, such as the European Media Freedom Act, can serve as examples. Đorđe Bojović, Western Balkans Advisor for the Greens European Free Alliance group in the European Parliament stresses that it is important for the region to ask to be part of the digital single market. The European Commission should strongly support digital transformation and empower media to produce content that competes with manipulative content.

**Implementation of the Code of Practice against Disinformation (CoP):** Challenges, including language barriers and insufficient platform contacts, must be addressed before implementing the CoP. Svetlana Siljanoska, Communications and PR associate, NATO and security affairs to the Prime Minister of North Macedonia stressed that **a regional infrastructure is needed to overcome these issues, and a comprehensive, whole-society approach is essential. This approach should involve all relevant stakeholders, including citizens.**

**Cooperation in the Region:** Collaboration and experience sharing among Western Balkan countries are key, as they can guide the region towards developing a unified approach to the Digital Single Market. The European Commission's support is much needed for establishing and maintaining this collaboration. It's important to include Western Balkan countries in policy spaces and to approach online platforms collectively to ensure their accountability in the region. Their perspective and involvement are essential in shaping the digital landscape.

The central message of this session emphasized that the Western Balkan countries should proactively express their desire to join the Digital Single Market. However, their commitment to fulfilling all the necessary requirements is equally crucial. The responsibility falls on the European Commission to acknowledge the significance of including these countries in the DSM and to provide them with the necessary support to facilitate a smooth integration process. This collaborative effort is essential for the digital growth and development of both the Western Balkan countries and the broader European digital ecosystem.



## The prospects of mobility driven Research and Innovation:

### How to strengthen Western Balkans integration into European Research Area?



The panel's primary focus was on devising a comprehensive strategy to enhance the integration of the Western Balkan region into the European Research Area. This strategy aimed to go beyond mere alignment and sought to foster active collaboration between the Western Balkan countries and their European counterparts, enabling them to participate fully in pioneering progressive initiatives within the European research landscape.

#### Key Discussion Points

**Strengthening Mobility-Driven Research and Innovation in the Region:** To ensure sustained economic growth, resilient societies, and accelerated integration of the Western Balkans into the European Research Area, it is essential for political leaders and stakeholders to provide financial support and endorse the research and innovation ecosystem within the region and its collaboration with the EU. This requires clear political will, commitment, and policy actions on the part of governments. Blerjana Bino, Executive Director of SCiDEV, lauded the progress made in this area by the Western Balkan countries - **“Chapter 25 on science and research for all the Western Balkan countries shows constant progress compared to the other ones, although there are different paces or magnitudes between the countries of the region... still, we believe from the work that we have done during consultations with stakeholders that there is still room for improvement despite the achievements and much more to be done.”** Speakers also stressed the importance of the role of parliaments in holding governments accountable for their commitments to regional initiatives, like the Berlin Process, as increased financial support from the EU and participating countries should be linked to accountability and good governance.

**Access to Research Infrastructures in the Region:** Improving visibility and accessibility to research infrastructures in the Western Balkans is a priority. Sharing experiences and best practices while maximizing human capital and resources is essential. Efforts should be made to make mobility for young researchers within the region and in the EU more attractive, addressing hidden barriers within universities. Lisa Cowey, Key Expert on IPR and Technology Transfer highlighted the challenges posed by gatekeepers, and the need to convince rectors, deans, and senior researchers that there are advantages to people taking

up a mobility, going abroad to build their networks, and use research equipment somewhere else. Recognizing the challenges young researchers face, such as feeling undervalued and disconnected from senior researchers, is crucial for improving the research environment. Bernhard Fabianek, Senior Expert for the Western Balkans at the Horizon Europe Association Unit in DG Research and Innovation stressed that a solution could be showing the possibilities to the gatekeepers on what can be done and how it can be done - **“and that's why we value civil society, which is sort of the neutral body or its third element to the equation that really puts a bit of a mirror in front of us to make this happen.”**

**Strengthening Western Balkan Integration into the European Research Area:** It is important to demonstrate the tangible impact of research and innovation initiatives on local communities. Sanja Damjanovic, Scientist at GSI Helmholtz Centre for Heavy Ion Research, Darmstadt focused her remarks on the role of the Western Balkan governments in pushing research forward - **“their role is always crucial, because they are the ones who decide what the percentage of GDP is for research and innovation, and they are the ones who decide which infrastructural projects are important to be financed by capital projects... they are the ones who define the strategies, and of course, what's also important is that they define whether we need or have legislation, which is very important to boost innovation.”** Anastas Mishev, Professor of Computer Science and Engineering, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University highlighted the innovations taking place in research processes. He stressed that **“infrastructures are becoming very important for every kind of research, being in the era of data-driven research means that you need appropriate and quality infrastructures to perform excellent research.”** As such, inclusion in the European Research Area would offer a wider platform for research cooperation in many formats.

**Strategic Aspects of the Berlin Process on Associating the Western Balkans with EU Programs:** A cooperative approach that prioritizes regional common interests over personal agendas is needed. Empowering the diaspora and involving them in initiatives can foster brain circulation, ensure continuity, and help address key challenges faced by stakeholders in the field of research and innovation in the WB region. Lucian Brujan, Berlin Process Coordinator for Education, Science and Innovation, German Academy of Science Leopoldina taking into consideration current geopolitical dynamics, stated **“...the world we live today, even in science and research, is not the same as it was in 2014 and I don't want to insist on geopolitics, but I just can say, because I do science, diplomacy, and also advise the federal government on some issues: expect the unexpected, every crisis has, a chance of doing something positive, even if a crisis is a negative one overall.”**

**Role of Education in Regional Cooperation:** Panelists stressed the need to showcase the possibilities and benefits that collaborative efforts in research and innovation can bring, rather than pursuing science solely for **its own sake**. Albana Tole, Deputy Minister of Education and Sports of Albania stressed that **the country is also committed to internationalizing scientific and technological cooperation among higher education institutions**. Albania is actively working on establishing a supportive ecosystem and enhancing the legal frameworks for higher education and strategic research, which includes participation in EU framework programs. The country's objectives are to align national priorities

with increased funding for education and innovation.

**S3 (Smart Specialization Strategies) Interrelates with Mobility-Driven Research and Innovation:** As the S3 journey nears completion, planning for the future is essential. Linda Pustina, Advisor to the Deputy Prime Minister of Albania and Head of Albanian S3 Team states “**S3 was a long journey; we started in 2016 and are now quite at the end of the process. The strategy is going to be finalized by June 2024, and we are starting to prepare the strategy after having passed through a wide consultation process based on a new methodology that was suggested by the European Commission GRC and that foresees a bottom-up approach and a wide level of consultation from the first phases of starting the drafting of the strategy, not only at the end of it.**” Engaging all stakeholders and institutions is crucial to maximize the impact of the strategy. Implementing the quadruple helix model, which involves collaboration between academia, research industry, government, and civil society, is important. Additionally, involving actors from various ministries and establishing open research and innovation centers and shared lab spaces in Albania and the region are key components of the S3 strategy.

A key message from this panel underscores the pivotal role that research, innovation, and knowledge transfer play in the Western Balkans. These elements possess the transformative potential necessary to expedite sustainable growth and promote economic convergence between the Western Balkan economies and the European Union. However, unlocking this potential hinges on addressing the pressing challenges related to research and innovation, as well as mobility-driven innovation in the Western Balkans. Timely resolution of these challenges is essential to catalyze regional cooperation and to pave the way for seamless integration into the EU, including full participation in the European Research Area.

## Unlocking Progress: What's Next?



The closing panel offers a comprehensive array of insights and perspectives concerning vital issues within the Western Balkans, particularly pertaining to the European integration process. It centers on conducting a comprehensive review of the progress made in the Berlin Process thus far, highlighting its primary accomplishments, identifying the significant challenges it has encountered, and delineating the necessary enhancements required to effectively address the current issues prevailing in the region.

### Key Discussion Points

**The Security Implications of the war in Ukraine:** The Russian aggression against Ukraine has served as a wake-up call for the EU, highlighting the strategic importance of Ukraine for the stability of Eastern Europe and European security as a whole. This war not only underscores the sovereignty of Ukraine but also the sovereignty of Moldova and Georgia, with a focus on Georgia's potential EU membership. Valeska Esch, Senior Advisor to the Federal Government Special Representative for the Countries of the Western Balkans highlighted that **“the Russian aggression against Ukraine has shown how vulnerable we are to our energy supply and energy security and this something where the Berlin Process has launched a very important initiative that not only serves to help the region move forward on energy transition but also, if again, you look at the EU enlargement process, mirrored after the European Green Deal, this is really a crucial field where the region risks widening the gap to the European Union if it does not respond and work on these issues.”** The region's security concerns demand an effective response, and Berlin Process can play a vital role in this regard.

**Reforms in Enlargement and the New Methodology:** Reforming the EU's enlargement policy is crucial to ensure that candidate countries benefit from the advantages of EU membership before accession. Bojan Marichikj, Deputy Prime Minister of North Macedonia focused his remarks on the importance seizing the moment. Marichikj stated that **“after a long time, there is serious, substantial content on EU enlargement, which is a big change that we should commend as candidate countries.”** He followed by highlighting the benefits of the new methodology, which as demonstrated with North Macedonia and Albania, offering

a more substantial and accelerated accession process. Michael Roth, Chair of the Bundestag Foreign Affairs Committee in his keynote speech stressed that **a large majority of citizens in the region continue to see their future in the European Union, despite all the disappointments and broken promises of the European Union. This is why the people and governments of EU candidate countries need the tangible benefits that come with EU accession. To achieve this, the enlargement process must be reformed in such a way that the citizens of candidate countries are able to benefit from the initial advantages of EU membership even before formal accession has taken place.** Panelists stressed that regional cooperation must be a cornerstone of the enlargement policy, as such initiatives can facilitate practical benefits for the people in the region.

**Kosovo and the Berlin Process:** Liza Gashi, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora of Kosovo stresses that **“for Kosovo, the Berlin Process has been a very valuable complementary process”** as it promotes mutual equality and reciprocity among Western Balkan countries. The fact that not all neighbors recognize Kosovo's existence and the 2024 attack on its sovereignty and territorial integrity underscore the need for a regional approach. While the Berlin Process has seen moderate success, the EU must articulate a more unified stance and prevent external interference from Russia and China. Panelists stressed that dialogue, neighborly relations, cooperation, and addressing democratization and good governance issues through action are the key to progress in the region.

**Achievements of the Berlin Process in the Western Balkans:** The Berlin Process has significantly influenced the EU enlargement agenda, focusing on common regional market development and the energy transition. Ardian Hackaj, Research Director and Coordinator of Tirana Connectivity Forum at the Cooperation and Development Institute stated that **the Berlin Process is often characterized as a process with three notable absences: it lacks a budget, formal institutions, and legislative authority. Nevertheless, it has given rise to a holistic platform comprising committed participants who collaborate on matters of development, reform, regional cooperation, and enlargement. What the Berlin Process has introduced into this equation is a significant injection of political will.** By shifting attention away from bilateral issues, the process has fostered regional cooperation, with initiatives like the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO).

**Follow-Up After the Civil Society and Think Tank Forum:** The Berlin Process's success depends on political leaders' willingness to participate in regional cooperation and dialogue alongside EU leaders. Hedvig Morvai, Program Director of the ERSTE Foundation stressed that **civil society's role in this process should be better appreciated by governmental structures, and active follow-up after events like the Civil Society and Think Tank Forum is essential, which includes communicating key recommendations to different stakeholders, not limited to political summits, and ensuring that the issues discussed align with the agenda.**

**Interdependence of the Berlin Process and EU Integration:** The Berlin Process provides a platform for willing actors to engage in regional cooperation and enlargement, fostering political will. Marta Szpała, Senior Fellow at the Center

for Eastern Studies stressed that **Berlin Process cannot move forward when the main process which is enlargement policy is not delivering. Aleksander Siemaszko, Deputy Director in Ministry of Development and Technology of Poland stressed that EU integration is a two-way process, necessitating reforms in both EU policies and those of candidate countries.** Lessons learned from the past decade, including investments and the new EU methodology, must be applied to the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. Full EU integration cannot be achieved without the active involvement of these regions.

The overarching message from this closing session underscores the enduring importance of the Berlin Process, which, rather than supplanting the enlargement policy, functions as a valuable complement on a significant scale. The Berlin Process maintains its relevance in tackling present regional challenges, as enlargement policy has evolved significantly considering new geopolitical dynamics.

# Annex 1

## Final TWG papers

#CSFTirana2023



**CIVIL  
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2023

14 / 15  
OCTOBER



# Key Recommendations of the Thematic Working Group on Access to European Single Market

**OPEN SOCIETY  
FOUNDATIONS**  
WESTERN BALKANS

 **Cooperation &  
Development  
Institute**  
Instituti për Bashkëpunim  
dhe Zhvillim

 **ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ  
ELIAMEP**  
ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΕΡΩΝΕΙΑΚΟ ΚΑΙ ΕΞΩΤΕΡΙΚΟ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΟ  
ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗ ΦΙΛΟΚΑΤΑΝΟΜΙΑ ΓΙΑ ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΗ ΚΑΙ ΕΞΩΤΕΡΙΚΗ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗ



Led by  
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**Reviewer**

Isabelle Ioannides

**About the process**

This paper is based on inputs from three regional online consultation events and one hybrid public event of the Thematic Working Group “Access to European Single Market” organised between June and September 2023. The thematic working group led by the European Policy Institute, Skopje gathered more than 65 experts from civil society, academia, private sector, and state administration from the Western Balkan Six and the Member States<sup>1</sup>, while the event was attended by 83 participants. The European Policy Institute (EPI) facilitated the consultation process, alongside a core group of experts.

For ten years in a row, the Berlin Process has supported the sustainable growth of the Western Balkans, fostering the connectivity project in the region while advancing the prospect of European integration for the countries of the Western Balkans<sup>2</sup>. The EU institutions and Member States have pledged technical and financial support that provide impetus for cooperation in strategic industrial areas and to support the regional markets to be more competitive.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, the modalities of the enlargement policy of the European Union (EU) have been widely discussed across Europe. The think tank community has proposed gradual, staged, and sectoral integration or full participation in the EU Single Market. These proposals aim to fill the gap created by the slow progress in delivering on the “phasing-in” feature of the enlargement methodology and the enlargement process overall. In line with the civil society proposals, the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen presented the four-pillar plan for the Western Balkans: closer association with the Single Market, deepening regional economic integration, accelerating fundamental reforms, and increasing pre-accession funds.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has created a new geopolitical momentum for the enlargement process. The EU response has shown that swift trade derogations, market integration initiatives, and increased funding are possible in the changing geopolitical context. There is also a pressing need for an urgent response for the Western Balkans while emphasising the rule of law as a primary principle.

**Given the current political developments in Europe, the upcoming Berlin Process Summit should put forward policy proposals and concrete initiatives enhancing economic cooperation and integration between the Western Balkans and the EU prior to accession.** Active involvement by the EU and the Member States, particularly those participating in the Berlin Process, is required to support the region and clearly **offer further integration into the Single Market, help strengthen Western Balkan countries’ economic governance framework and increase EU funding to support economic convergence.** In parallel, the Western Balkan countries must undertake and implement the necessary reforms to meet the EU rules and standards for products and services and other relevant parts of the Single Market acquis, strengthen public finance management, and accelerate structural reforms.

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<sup>1</sup> The European Policy Institute, Skopje expresses appreciation to all participants of the Thematic working group. A special thanks goes to Silvana Mojsavska, Matteo Bonomi and Zlatko Veterovski for their valuable input for the thematic sessions.

<sup>2</sup> Final Declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans, 2014

<sup>3</sup> Common Regional Market – A catalyst for deeper regional economic integration and a stepping stone towards EU Single Market

## OFFER ADVANCED ACCESS TO THE EU SINGLE MARKET AS PART OF THE ACCESSION PROCESS

Deeper integration with the EU could support value chain integration and is expected to increase the export of both intermediary and final goods to the EU Single Market<sup>4</sup>. With the abolition of tariffs and trade liberalisation from the early 2000s and the establishment of the free trade area under the SAAs, the EU has become the leading trade partner of the Western Balkan countries, accounting for over two-thirds of the region's total trade. Nevertheless, the region's share in the overall EU trade is marginal<sup>5</sup>. Despite the trade preferences and potentials between the EU and the six Western Balkan countries (WB6), trade relations are subject to non-tariff barriers to trade (NBTs). The differences in technical regulations, requiring licenses and certificates and other product compliances, increase costs and distort trade between the parties. Thus, further economic integration ahead of full accession could be a promising path towards improving the living standards in the WB6<sup>6</sup>, at a low economic and political cost for the EU. Several challenges should be considered when discussing granting access to the EU Single Market for the WB6.

First, the EU Single Market is founded on the respect of the rule of law. Robust and impartial regulatory bodies have to be established and are essential to guarantee and oversee the enforcement of the EU acquis. Independent judicial systems are the recourse where market participants seek justice so that EU rules are applied fairly and equally. Judicial cooperation and the recognition of judgments in civil and commercial matters ultimately depend on national courts. Thus, judicial independence, or the lack of it, remains the weakest area for the region. From this perspective, strengthening the rule of law in the WB6 becomes an essential precondition for the success of any policy proposal, including facilitated access to the Single Market.

Second, the pace in terms of alignment with and implementation of the EU acquis in the region varies from country to country for each of the four freedoms. On the other hand, the need to strengthen the capacities of key institutions able to monitor the implementation of the relevant rules and standards is relevant across the board. Ongoing policy developments, such as the customs union reform and the carbon border adjustment mechanism, including new patterns of trade, particularly the rise of commerce and parcel deliveries, would increase compliance costs not only for the state institutions but the private sector as well, bearing the burden of alignment with EU rules and standards. Cautious thinking is also required when considering market liberalisation, particularly for the free movement of people and capital. Emigration and capital outflow are or are least perceived to cause devastating effects on the domestic economies.

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<sup>4</sup> Oliver Reiter and Robert Stehrer, Value Chain Integration of the Western Balkan Countries and Policy Options for the Post-COVID-19 Period, Vienna Institute for International Economic Affairs, March 2021

<sup>5</sup> [https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/western-balkans\\_en](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/western-balkans_en)

<sup>6</sup> Richard Grieveson, A change of EU strategy in the Western Balkans is long overdue, Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, September 2020

Third, the logic of the institutional set-up opens up a big debate on how to approach the integration into the EU market for the WB6. The SAAs provide a solid legal foundation for products coming from the Western Balkans to receive internal market treatment, conditioned upon alignment with the relevant *acquis*<sup>7</sup>. The Energy Community and the Transport Community, as well as the European Civil Aviation Area, serve for sectoral integration of the WB6 to the EU Single Market in the specific areas for goods and services. There is a risk, however, that many different modalities of implementation and monitoring of “phasing-in”, could, in parallel with current bilateral SAAs and regional multilateral sectoral treaties, make the process even more complex and less understandable for businesses and citizens in the region.

Fourth, the Western Balkan countries committed to an action plan to create a Common Regional Market (CRM) in trade investment, digital, and industrial and innovation areas. This plan has been perceived as the stepping stone for the EU Single Market. Affected by bilateral disputes and political obstacles, the adoption and implementation dynamics of the targeted CRM actions, particularly in the trade area, i.e. the four freedoms, have taken a discouragingly slow pace. Even though significant political capital is invested in this process by the EU institutions and the Member States, the CRM does not live up to its potential. On the other hand, access to the EU Single Market is a more attractive offer for the countries in the region. The Visegrad countries serve as an example that deeper EU integration can itself stimulate deeper regional ties<sup>8</sup>. The size of the market and the already established trade relations offer more business opportunities. If bound together, these processes could reinforce each other: access to the EU Single Market would be an incentive for the implementation of the CRM.

**In this context, the European Commission should present a plan with a feasible timeline to allow the markets of the WB6 to immediately access the EU Single Market in all areas that would not impose high adjustment costs and would be highly beneficial and visible for businesses and citizens with EU accession as the end goal.** Further fragmentation should be avoided. Access to the Single Market should be combined with existing ongoing processes in the Western Balkan countries, such as the accession negotiations and screening and the implementation of the CRM. The Commission should apply strict conditionality on rule of law and functioning of institutions for key issues that have to be delivered by the WB6 governments.

**Matching institutions in the WB6 countries and their counterparts in the EU Member States, including the ones that are part of the Berlin Process, through twinning projects and technical support could be an essential learning experience.** Such an approach could allow for a greater learning experience and for building capacities, as well as the socialisation and policy coordination between national institutions while keeping the EU integration process at the heart of the process.

**The Western Balkan governments should manifest their unequivocal commitment to implement and monitor the implementation of the reforms linked to the Single Market acquis.** The interest to integrate into the EU market must be followed up with political commitment and implementation of the relevant acquis. Sufficient budgetary funds dedicated to strengthening material and technical capacities, as well as staff retention, must be ensured to enable key institutions to safeguard European rules and standards. Proactive engagement with the chambers of commerce in building the capacities of the private sector to meet the requirements of the existing and upcoming legislation of the EU Single Market is needed. Timely information for the private sector on the opportunities and obligations from granted access to the EU Single Market would allow domestic companies, including local SMEs, to carry the compliance burden.<sup>9</sup>

**The European Commission and the Western Balkan leaders should ensure that the policy dialogue on EU integration is open and transparent to non-state actors.** Businesses can provide the on-the-field experience to identify and address key bottlenecks in the short term and also feed into strategies for long-term transformation. Failure to listen to the business community in the region could increase market pressure and negatively impact competitiveness. The early involvement of CSOs that are vocal advocates in the EU accession process would help legitimise the reform processes. It would also be an investment in civil society capable of being an equal partner in EU policy-making in the future. Above all, such an inclusive approach would allow for the mobilisation of all stakeholders to monitor economic and business relations and the impact of the undertaken reforms.

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<sup>7</sup> For more detailed analysis see Zoran Sretic, Sectoral integration opportunities in the SAA regime: The case for the internal market treatment of products, Belgrade: Centre for European Policy, June 2023

<sup>8</sup> Richard Grieveson, A change of EU strategy in the Western Balkans is long overdue, Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, September 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Observatory of European SMEs 2003, No.6 The impact of EU enlargement on European SMEs

## IMPROVE ECONOMIC GOVERNANCE POLICY COORDINATION

The economic governance and coordination frameworks for the Member States could be combined with the EU accession mechanisms for the Western Balkans. Access to the EU Single Market will not improve public finance management per se. Sectoral structural reforms should be addressed through legislative changes, but in some policy areas they are not acquis heavy. Public administration reform, education policy, digital and green transformation, and research and innovation are necessary for a well-functioning market economy and are extremely important in terms of competitiveness and inclusive growth.

The preparation of the Economic Reform Programmes (ERPs) has created the institutional structure and mobilised administrative services to work on multiannual budget and reform planning. Over the past several years, the level of implementation of the country-specific recommendations is, on average, higher among the WB6 countries.<sup>10</sup> With no tangible enlargement perspective, however, there is a risk of it becoming an imposed exercise. There is a lack of strong ownership in the ERP process among line ministries, and the structural reform measures tend to be selected and implemented based on the allocated budget funding for areas that are a political priority. Multiannual budgetary planning is inadequate or pro forma; in many cases, the prioritisation of structural measures is non-transparent and has no transformative effects.

In terms of coordination between the Western Balkans and the EU, there is a notable mismatch between the ERP annual cycle and the European Semester calendar. National administrations in the Western Balkans currently adapt to different planning, preparation, and submission deadlines. As the countries have submission deadlines in January, the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy cannot be considered and incorporated into the ERPs. The Member States and the EU institutions, on the other hand, do not have a forum where they interact and have the opportunity to better understand the technical challenges the candidates face at an operational level. Equally, the countries cannot have a say in the EU growth strategy, even though this policy guidance directly or indirectly affects their economies.

**In that light, the European Commission should propose a plan to align the European Semester with the ERP cycles.** Closer and regular ex ante coordination, rather than ex post coordination, would allow for early detection, prevention and correct macroeconomic imbalances. It may also serve a good cause in a situation of loose monitoring and measurement of the performance of the countries in the ERP process. More substantial engagement with EU institutions, or even the application of conditionalities of the Stability and Growth Pact and the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure, could transfer knowledge and stimulate the planning of national budgets around structural reforms and sound public finances in the medium and long term.

**The European Commission should allow for the gradual participation of the Western Balkan countries in the EU economic governance framework.** Participation in the European Semester and the broader economic governance framework of the EU could spread more enthusiasm among public officials, the administrations as well as non-state actors, enhancing systematic thinking about the structural reforms and increasing their implementation and impact.

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<sup>10</sup> See Progress towards Meeting the Economic Criteria for EU Accession The EU Commission's 2022 Assessments, and 2022 Economic Reform Programmes of Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo\*: The Commission's Overview and Country Assessments

## MAKE BETTER USE OF EXISTING AND INCREASING EU FUNDING FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

The WB6 access to the EU budget has remained limited and highly disproportionate to its level of market integration within the EU. Despite some shifts within current allocations with the Connectivity Agenda and the Economic and Investment Plan, the total allocation of IPA funds for the Western Balkans has remained unchanged over the last three EU budgetary cycles (2007–2013; 2014–2020; 2021–2027) covering a period of 21 years. The budget has remained stable at approximately € 10 billion for each seven-year period. The average per capita receipt by the Western Balkan countries over the entire 2021–2027 MFF has been estimated at € 500.<sup>11</sup>

In view of discussions on facilitated market integration, the question of increasing the EU's transfers to the region gains significance. Given the renewed focus on EU enlargement since Russia's war in Ukraine and in light of the revised enlargement methodology, "accelerated integration" and "phasing-in" considerations of how to provide the Western Balkans with greater access to the EU budget and participation in the EU institutions are gaining momentum, as emphasized by the Commission President at the Globsec Bratislava Forum and EUCO President at the Bled Forum in the summer of 2023.

Despite the existing consensus that increased EU investment in the region is necessary, the working group discussions underscored essential challenges such as the mounting needs on the Union budget and absorption capacity in the region. As for the former, studies have shown that the financial impact of increased support to the Western Balkans would be minimal on the Union's budget.<sup>12</sup> As for the latter, most of the WB6 administrations are already struggling to provide mature projects and thus do not manage to use the existing funds which are at their disposal, coupled with concerns of weak governance practices. In parallel, research has shown that the EU funds the national administrations in the region manage in a decentralised manner have been constantly reduced.<sup>13</sup> This approach puts into question the feasibility of building capacity for future Member States.

**The European Commission should, by the end of the year, present a formal plan for boosting pre-accession assistance in this multiannual financial framework (MFF) as part of the mid-term review and start discussions with EU Member States on revamping pre-accession assistance in the next MFF, earmarking funds for the potential accession of countries that would be activated in case the conditions of accession are met.**

<sup>11</sup> Reljic D, "The EU's quest for strategic autonomy in the Western Balkans: Why it flopped," in: In Search of EU Strategic Autonomy: What Role for the Western Balkans? A Conversation with Odeta Barbullushi, Dejan Jović, Tanja Mišćević, Zoran Nechev, Dušan Reljić and Majda Ruge, edited by Matteo Bonomi, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome, 2021, p. 37.

<sup>12</sup> Vasja Rant, Mojmir Mrak & Matej Marinč (2020) The Western Balkans and the EU budget: the effects of enlargement, Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 20:3.

<sup>13</sup> Milena Mihajlovic, Reforming the EU pre-accession instrument, Belgrade: Centre for European Policy, September 2023



These funds **need to be strictly tied to the rule of law conditionality**, as has been argued in the report of the Court of Auditors on the use of IPA funds for democracy and the rule of law.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, **the European Commission should review the modalities of implementing its pre-accession assistance in view of facilitating the future EU membership of the Western Balkans.** From this perspective, these implementation modalities should assist in building the administrative capacities of the candidates, including, but not limited to, facilitating decentralised management of assistance.

Moreover, **the European Commission and national governments in the Western Balkans should ensure meaningful inclusion and participation of key societal stakeholders**, including CSOs, in the planning, impact assessments, and monitoring of the use of EU funds. The objective would be twofold: first, such processes will facilitate the monitoring in view of the rule of law conditionality, and second, broad processes will ensure a consensus on priorities, including funds for companies' adjustment, including for SMEs, to access to the Single Market and the processes of digitalisation and greening.

**As a precondition, the European Commission and WB6 national governments should significantly increase the transparency of the planning, management, implementation, monitoring, reporting, and evaluation of pre-accession funds.** Transparency is essential for meaningful participation of non-state actors in the abovementioned processes, informing potential direct beneficiaries of the assistance and overall accountability in the use of the funds.

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<sup>14</sup> European Court of Auditors, 2022 "Special Report 01/2022: EU Support for the Rule of Law in the Western Balkans: Despite Efforts, Fundamental Problems Persist"



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# Key Recommendations of the Thematic Working Group on Climate and Green Agenda

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Development  
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Instituti për Bashkëpunim  
dhe Zhvillim

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**ELIAMEP**  
ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΚΕΝΤΡΟ ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΗΣ & ΕΞΩΤΕΡΩΣ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣ  
HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN & FOREIGN POLICY

Led by  
**Institute for Good Governance and Policies  
in Environment and Climate Change  
(IPECC) (North Macedonia)**

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**Reviewer**

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**About the process**

This Policy Paper is prepared by the Institute for Good Governance and Policies in Environment and Climate Change (IPECC) as the leader of the Thematic Working Group (TWG) on Climate and Green Agenda of the 2023 Civil Society and Think Tank Forum (CSF2023) of the Berlin Process. The views outlined in the Policy Paper were shaped through a comprehensive consultation process, involving representatives from the CSOs, members of the TWG on Climate and Green Agenda and stakeholders from the WB6, and prominent experts from the WB6 and the European Union (EU), as well as through desk research presented in Introduction Papers and insights gained through advocacy visits. The process involved three consultation meetings with 266 stakeholders and a public hybrid conference attended by 102 participants. These recommendations are a result of targeted and comprehensive efforts of the Thematic Working Group on Climate and Green Agenda.

This year's consultations were focused on the topic of "Green Infrastructure Investments", highlighting the importance of: "Good Governance in the Environment" and "Biodiversity and Protection of Natural Resources." In this document, "Green Infrastructure Investment" encompasses investments in projects aimed at reducing pollution, including, but not limited to, wastewater treatment, waste management, sustainable transportation and enhancement of natural-based solutions.<sup>1</sup> Main challenges and needs for actions in the six Western Balkan countries (WB6) were jointly mapped, analysed and linked with recommendations so as to address them efficiently and effectively. These recommendations will be presented to the leaders of the European Union (EU) and the WB6 during the 2023 Berlin Process Summit scheduled to take place in October 2023 in Tirana.

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<sup>1</sup> As defined by EC Communication 52013DC0249  
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52013DC0249>

## THE EU AND WESTERN BALKANS CLIMATE AND GREEN AGENDA POLICY CONTEXT

Formulated recommendations are closely linked with, and contribute to achieving, the key goals of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, which relies on regulatory reforms in the region to align them with the objectives of the European Green Deal, as well as relevant investments as part of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans (EIP), implemented through the mechanism of the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF). The Green Agenda for WB6 is considered a key driver of the transition to a modern, carbon-neutral, climate-resilient and resource-efficient economies of the WB countries and the region.

During the preparation of the Policy Paper and its associated recommendations, insights from the regular Annual Reports published by the European Commission on the progress of the Western Balkan countries in their EU accession process were thoroughly examined, as the key tool for monitoring the alignment of the candidate countries with the with EU standards and values. The new methodology for the accession negotiations, launched in 2020, was also considered, putting the focus on the relevant negotiating chapters: Chapter 22 – Regional Policy and Coordination of Structural Instruments in Cluster 5 – Resources, Agriculture and Cohesion, and Chapter 27 – Environment and Climate Change in Cluster 4 – Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity.

Recent European Commission Reports for all WB6 countries noted that, as regards Chapter 27, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia have some level of preparation, while Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo are at an early stage of preparation. On the other hand, with respect to Chapter 22, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia are moderately prepared, while BiH and Kosovo are at an early stage of preparation.

## MEETING THE GREEN AGENDA RELATED ACQUIS

The Green Agenda is a fundamental pillar in the EU's engagement with the Western Balkan countries, especially as it navigates the complex process of EU integration. It is reflected in the EU negotiation clusters of chapters, which cover Transport Policy (Chapter 14), Energy (Chapter 15), Trans-European Networks (Chapter 21) and Environment and Climate Change (Chapter 27). Experience of some of the most recent EU Member Countries has proven that negotiating Chapter 27 is widely regarded as one of the most financially demanding aspects of the accession process; meeting the requirements from this segment of the Acquis requires substantial funding for developing a critical infrastructure, particularly in the areas of water and waste management. Moreover, meeting climate neutrality requires additional financing in the private sector which will need to incorporate Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) principles in their corporate policies and practices and decrease their emissions. Investments in biodiversity are crucial to meet climate neutrality; thus, EU Ministers called for a significant proportion, 30% of the EU Budget and Next Generation EU expenditures allocated to addressing climate action, to be invested in biodiversity and nature-based solutions promoting biodiversity.<sup>2</sup>

Several Western Balkan countries assessed their investment needs pertaining to Chapter 27, either as a whole or for specific components of the Acquis, revealing considerable costs therefore. Serbia estimated approximately €12 billion (as of 2021)<sup>3</sup> needed for meeting Chapter 27 requirements, while Montenegro needs for the implementation of the Action Plan to meet the benchmarks of Chapter 27, covering 2021-2025, are estimated to nearly €483 million.<sup>4</sup> In 2017, North Macedonia assessed that €1.2 billion would be needed for the implementation of EU Urban Waste Water and Drinking Water Directives.<sup>5</sup> Financial needs for implementing the same Directives in Albania are estimated to be € 3.5 billion.<sup>6</sup>

Findings in the European Commission 2022 Annual Progress Reports show that the WB6 have weak and limited administrative capacity, moderate level of transposition and are at an early stage of the implementation of the EU environmental acquis. The extensive EU legislation pertaining to environment and climate change, which is further accelerated by the EU Green Deal, additionally increases the backlog of reforms in the Western Balkan countries. Therefore, this intensifies the demand for financial resources to alleviate the increasing fiscal pressures on their national budgets during the accession process. Addressing this disparity requires substantial and swift investments in the environmental and climate change sector.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11829-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Statement by State Secretary of Serbian Ministry of Environmental Protection made during the Leaders' Dialogue Event

"Implementing the Green Agenda for Economic and Societal Prosperity in the Western Balkan" held on 6-7 June, 2023 in Tirana

<sup>4</sup> <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Montenegro%20Report%202022.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> IPA Project: Development of National Water Study, EuropeAid/136505/IH/SER/MK (2017)

<sup>6</sup> SIDA funded project, Water Negotiations and Investment Planning Support, Albania (2023)

Absence of available funds for financing green infrastructure stands as the key challenge confronting the WB6. The challenge is further intensified by the insufficient and weak administrative capacities to effectively utilise the already provided EU funds, adding a layer of complexity to the existing difficult situation arising from the need for more financial resources.

EU's commitment to the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and substantial investments through the EIP emphasise the importance of good environmental governance. Simultaneously, it presents a unique opportunity to accelerate the region's transition to greener economies. Chapters 22 and 27 have pivotal roles to play in guiding the Western Balkans' efforts towards sustainable growth. Implementation of these chapters requires significant administrative capacities and strategic planning.

Existing Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) framework, although a solid foundation for building the countries' capacity to program and manage EU funds and implement EU Acquis, has demonstrated its limitations in achieving the desired results. Therefore, the Western Balkan countries require, all the more, innovative mechanisms that can be built on solidarity-based approach, incorporating both the logic and the operational framework of Cohesion Funds. It is crucial that both the EU and the Western Balkan countries finally find a way to effectively implement the core principle of the IPA into practice, which aims at equipping the pre-accession countries with the skills to manage EU post-accession funds. Thus, the countries should be given valuable opportunities to accumulate relevant experience along their journey towards EU membership.

The above-mentioned factors underscore the necessity for a paradigm shift, encompassing the design of EU funding support and the reconfiguring of its management structure and operational practices. The change should take into consideration the Western Balkan countries' aspiration to be EU Member States, the need for creating an effective and result-oriented system rather than politically correct one, building on a multi-level governance approach, and ensuring the involvement of regional, local, and other public authorities, including both the civil society and the private sector.

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<sup>9</sup> Observatory of European SMEs 2003, No.6 The impact of EU enlargement on European SMEs

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### I. Improving the green infrastructure investments in the Western Balkan countries

**1. The European Union (EU) should further enhance its support to the Western Balkan countries by establishing a funding mechanism built on solidarity and multi-level governance approach.** This mechanism's primary objective should be to address the financial needs of the Western Balkan countries in achieving compliance with the EU Acquis and transitioning towards a carbon-neutral society. While the IPA provides a solid foundation for developing an instrument that closely aligns with the objectives and the operational logic of the EU Cohesion Funds, it has also displayed some limitations in accelerating the integration of the WB6 and meeting the EU standards. The European Commission should initiate legislative measures to further modify and adopt this funding mechanism, ensuring both its alignment with the post-2027 cohesion policy and its effectiveness in the EU's multiannual financial framework from 2028 to 2035. It is also essential for the mechanism to include active participation by the regional and the local public authorities, the civil society and the private sector, thereby ensuring strong stakeholder ownership. Furthermore, **the EU should ensure that the programming and management of the funding mechanism are based on ownership and transparency** throughout the entire lifecycle of the projects, from their initial planning to their implementation. Transparency fosters ownership, enhances accountability and helps mitigate challenges arising from bureaucracy, capacity limitations and potential instances of corruption.

**2. The EU, the Western Balkan countries, the international organisations and the financial institutions should all work towards establishing a "WB6 Regional Hub focused on Infrastructure Projects"** so as to boost regional cooperation by jointly planning and enhancing implementation of green infrastructure projects and attracting and uniting skilled and experienced professionals from the region possessing the required expertise and capabilities. The expected results would include accelerated mobilisation and absorption of European, bilateral, multilateral and national funds, promoting synergies and avoiding duplication of efforts. Existing capacities, such as those possessed by the Secretariat of the Transport Community, should be leveraged to identify and promote such projects in transport sector, for example, with regional impact.

**3. The EU and the Western Balkan countries should ensure sufficient financial and administrative support to the private sector in the region, encouraging them to make sustained efforts towards a blue and green/circular economy.** This includes addressing waste management, recycling, sustainable production and efficient resource utilisation and assisting the commercial banking system in the Western Balkan countries to align with EU environmental requirements in their financial services.



## II. Strengthening good governance in environment and climate, as an essential element for the implementation of the Green Agenda

**4. Prime Ministers, Ministers of Finance and Ministers of Environment in the Western Balkan countries should take swift action to enhance the capacities of national and sub-national authorities entrusted with environment and climate change responsibilities.** This action should be accompanied by focused efforts to strengthen the effectiveness of donors' programming and management, specifically emphasising Chapters 22 and 27 and the implementation of the Green Agenda. Simultaneously, robust policies for staff retention need to be formulated and implemented.

**5. The process of enhancing administrative capabilities should be expedited, considering the urgency of the matter.** By doing so, the Western Balkan countries will be better positioned to navigate the complexities of environmental compliance and reaching climate neutrality, in consonance with the objectives of the EU integration process and the Green Agenda. Both **national and local** administrative structures should be equally addressed with continuous technical and financial support. CSOs can play an important role in addressing certain capacity needs, thereby supporting Western Balkan countries in implementing the EU's environment and climate acquis and achieving climate neutrality.

## III. Increasing investments in biodiversity and the protection of natural resources, which are at the heart of climate change mitigation and adaptation

**6. Leaders of the Western Balkan countries should take decisive measures in securing sustainable funding dedicated to the preservation and the restoration of the region's invaluable natural resources.** Safeguarding biodiversity and ecosystems is essential for reaching climate neutrality of the Western Balkan countries, therefore, the biodiversity protection funding should be incrementally increased to reach 30% of the total national funding related to environment and climate within the next five years. Legislation for climate mainstreaming of the national budgets should be immediately adopted by WB6 countries.

**7. Western Balkan countries should proactively align their policies with the "EU's Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 - Bringing Nature Back into Our Lives."** At the heart of this alignment lies the implementation of measures to achieve the set objectives of creating a coherent network of well-managed protected areas and protecting minimum of 30% of the land area in the Western Balkans and 30% of their waters (seas), a third of which is/should be strictly protected. This represents 10% of Western Balkans countries' land and 10% of their sea.

**8. The EU should ascertain a minimum of 30% of its climate-related funding for the Western Balkan countries to be invested in biodiversity and nature-based solutions.** These solutions are essential for nurturing biodiversity and funds should be directed towards enhancing the management effectiveness of protected areas, ensuring compliance with EU strategies and requirements related to Natura 2000, and creating incentives for local authorities and residents to manage rural areas through the implementation of green businesses, with the goal of halting further urbanisation and outmigration from rural areas. Funds should be also allocated for the protection of critically endangered species and the management of transboundary clusters of protected areas and green corridors, ensuring long-term ecological connectivity in the region and establishment of partnerships between different authorities in charge of nature protection and protected areas, scientific institutions and CSOs from the region.



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# Key Recommendations of the Thematic Working Group on Digitalization and Connectivity

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dhe Zhvillim

 **ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ  
ELIAMEP**  
ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΕΡΕΥΝΗΤΙΚΟ ΚΕΝΤΡΟ  
ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΕΞΩΤΕΡΙΚΗΣ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣ  
HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN & FOREIGN POLICY

Led by  
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Isabelle Ioannides

**About the process**

These recommendations stem from consultations with over 30 participants from organizations and institutions working in areas like digital rights, media development, information integrity, democracy building, fact-checking, technology and others. The group had met 2 times and had regular online communications, as well as individual consultations on policy recommendations. Wider consultations were also held with 79 stakeholders like representatives of EU institutions, institutions of the governments in the region and EU based NGOs. Closed consultation meetings were also held, one with a group of CSO members of European Digital Rights Initiative (EDRI) and another with members of the SEECheck network. Two public events with 257 attendees also took place during the process a panel discussion at the POINT conference in Sarajevo, and one during the Digital Rights Summer School in Kotor. The group facilitators had advocacy meetings with representatives of EU institutions in Brussels, German ministries in Berlin, and individual meetings with decision makers, both at Bled Strategic Forum, and through visits to institutions in the region. UG Zašto ne facilitated the consultation process, alongside a core group of experts from each of the six Western Balkan countries.

The group focused on the EU Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Strengthened Code of Practice against Disinformation (CoP), regulatory and self-regulatory instruments (respectively) developed in the framework of the EU and EEA market to create a safer online environment and better protection of users on Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) and Very Large Online Search Engines (VLOSEs). It is of urgent importance that the Western Balkan (WB) countries implement key principles and mechanisms of DSA to ensure that its benefits, such as a safer online environment and a better protection of users, are felt in our countries. Equally urgent is a strong regional framework for strengthening information integrity, particularly on VLOPs that have become an irreplaceable trackway for information traffic, but do not come with the same safety measures laid out for the EU and EEA market in the CoP. Citizens of the Western Balkans countries are significantly exposed to illegal and harmful content online - including disinformation that is “an endemic and ubiquitous part of politics throughout the Western Balkans, without exception”;<sup>1</sup> it threatens their security and wellbeing. Countries in the region also face regulatory challenges and difficulties in tackling illegal and harmful content online, lack functional mechanisms to protect citizens from illegal and harmful content, and are unable to protect their rights as users and consumers of digital services.<sup>2</sup> Lack of platform accountability plays a major role as well. While the way very large online platforms operate continues to provide de facto financial incentives for disinformation-based business models<sup>3</sup> and allows for the proliferation of harmful content, platforms do not have legal representatives in the majority of Western Balkan countries, nor efficient contact points for relevant stakeholders who deal with online safety and security. This has created vast gray areas in the regional digital market, which negatively affects media credibility and information integrity, jeopardizes democratic processes, exacerbates foreign influence operations and creates risks for consumer safety and citizens’ rights online.

For the EU Digital Services Act (DSA to have full effect, its implementation) or the creation of an equivalent legal instrument tailored to the region would need to have the backing and support of the European Commission and the EU member countries, especially when it comes to ensuring its implementation and compliance on the side of VLOPs and VLSEs. In that light, the Western Balkans working group for connectivity and digitalization recognizes a much needed impetus for these goals in the announcement of the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen that the EU should take steps toward the region, particularly in terms of bringing it closer to the EU single market<sup>4</sup> and joining some important areas of the digital single market. As pointed out by President von der Leyen in the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, the Commission and the EU member states should “bring some of the benefits of the EU membership to the people of Western Balkans already today” - the area of digital single market is a perfect starting point for that approach.

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<sup>1</sup> Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, Policy Department for External Relations, Directorate General for External Policies of the Union, February 2021

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance: Regulation of Harmful Content Online in Bosnia and Herzegovina Between Freedom Of Expression And Harms To Democracy, Mediacentar Sarajevo, 2022

## 1. ACCELERATE AND FACILITATE THE ENTRANCE OF THE WESTERN BALKANS COUNTRIES INTO EU DIGITAL SINGLE MARKET

**Western Balkans governments and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) should:**

- Work towards establishing regional digital market that will ensure a seamless transition into EU digital market;
- Base their digital targets on the EU's Digital Decade Policy Programme and adhere to the declaration, as discussed at the Second Regulatory Dialogue between the EU and the Western Balkans;<sup>5</sup>
- Initiate and coordinate a regional-level cooperation to map and establish the region's maturity and preparedness to enter the digital single market, including:
  - determining building blocks needed for the DSA and DMA to be meaningfully and effectively implemented in individual countries and in the regional market;
- Actively involve the civil society and expert community in these processes.

**The European Commission and EU member states should:**

- Accelerate and facilitate the process of establishing the regional preconditions for the Western Balkans to enter the digital single market;
- Ensure that the entire region advances at the same pace wherever possible, including:
  - Supporting the synchronized, coordinated and unified approach to strengthening the regional digital market;
  - Supporting Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo to sign association agreements that includes their participation in the Digital Europe Programme,<sup>6</sup> so that they join Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia which already did this in June of 2023

**Civil society should:**

- Build a multi-stakeholder coalition with regional representation to actively participate and monitor the mapping of digital preparedness in individual countries and in the regional market;

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<sup>3</sup> For example, over 60% of articles flagged for disinformation in the Balkans countries were still monetized by Google - the largest percentage in all of Europe. See: How Google's Ad Business Funds Disinformation, Pro Publica, 2022

<sup>4</sup> Von der Leyen presents 4-pillar plan to bring Western Balkans closer to the EU, European Western Balkans, 2023

<sup>5</sup> Second Regulatory Dialogue between the EU and the Western Balkans | Shaping Europe's digital future

<sup>6</sup> The Digital Europe Programme

## 2. APPLY THE DSA OR AN EQUIVALENT REGULATORY INSTRUMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS REGION

### Western Balkans governments and the RCC should:

- Approach the European Commission to clarify their specific position regarding the DSA implementation, in light of the candidate countries' obligation to implement the DSA, as part of the EU acquis, into their legal frameworks. This should include:
  - a. defining modalities of cooperation with the Commission, other national competent authorities, and Digital Services Coordinators (DSCs);
  - b. defining modalities of cooperation with VLOPs and VLSEs that offer their services in the region;
  - c. exploring possibilities of engagement within the European Board for Digital Services, following the example of European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA) and Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications (BEREC) in which the candidate countries can participate as observers without voting rights.
- Work within a regional framework that regulates illegal and harmful content, including through the establishment of supervision and enforcement mechanisms.
  - d. Assume a coordinated approach that could lend the region a much stronger voice in communication both with the European Commission and the online platforms
  - e. Refrain from adopting individual, national legislation, as diverging national laws negatively affect the internal market, considering the inherently cross-border nature of the internet, which is generally used to provide digital services.
- Designate politically independent competent authorities - Digital Services Coordinators (DSCs) in a manner that would guarantee most efficiency, but also involve multiple stakeholders:
  - f. A Civil society, media organizations, academia, independent researchers and other relevant institutions can contribute with their relevant expertise and experience in dealing with different aspects of digital services and platforms and need to be meaningfully included in the work of these bodies;
  - g. The cooperation should be formalized, with respective roles and tasks of each stakeholder clearly defined.

**The European Commission and EU member states should:**

- Make a clear commitment to support full DSA implementation in the Western Balkan countries and allow the citizens of these countries to enjoy the same level of safety and protection online as the EU citizens.
- Insist on establishment of multi-stakeholder DSCs and a regional coordinated approach to regulation of illegal and harmful content.
- Include DSCs from the Western Balkan countries in the cooperation and coordination mechanisms envisaged under the DSA, such as requesting action from the DSC for the establishment of and participation in joint task forces, joint investigations and mutual assistance mechanisms.
- Request the VLOPs and VLOSEs to:
  - Extend their obligations under the DSA to their operations in the Western Balkan countries, including the obligations of cooperating with DSCs, trusted flaggers and vetted researchers to ensure due attention to local contexts, circumstances and languages, as well as legal obligations to report suspected criminal offenses and take down illegal content.
  - Include the regional countries in transparency reporting
  - Cooperate with regional law enforcement authorities, as well as DSCs and trusted flaggers designated by these authorities, in order to guarantee a high level of protection against illegal content disseminated online.

**Civil society should:**

- Take an active role in the work of DSCs, providing continuous participation and expert support for the regional regulatory framework and communication with online platforms.
- Build region-wide multi-stakeholder coalitions to advocate for VLOPs to make a commitment to grant the Western Balkan citizens the same level of protection and rights as in the EU countries, regarding transparency of their operations and content moderation activities (terms of use in the languages spoken in the region, including the region in their transparency reports, granting access to vetted research from the region, etc.).



### 3. ADVOCATE FOR THE VLOPS AND THE VLSEs TO EXPAND THE CODE OF PRACTICE AGAINST DISINFORMATION (COP)

#### Western Balkans governments and the RCC should:

- Engage with the European Commission in obtaining their assistance and support for the process of getting the platforms to commit to implement CoP in the Western Balkans.
- Initiate and coordinate a regional-level cooperation to approach online platforms in a coordinated and synchronized manner
- Insist on a regional approach to following CoP or equivalent set of commitments for the the region as a single digital market

#### The European Commission and EU member states should:

- Request the VLOPs and VLOSEs to expand the efforts taken under the CoP to the Western Balkans countries in order to:
  - Prevent the spread of harmful content such as disinformation, hoaxes and manipulation, especially in information crises that pose a serious threat for public health and security (e.g., a pandemic, a war, or a threat to democratic processes such as the elections);
  - Demonetize disinformation and establish functional cooperation with fact-checkers and researchers;
  - Adopt and implement a regional approach to following the CoP or an equivalent set of commitments and treat the entire region as a single digital market;
- Support civil society and anti-disinformation practitioners in their efforts to promote platform accountability.

#### Civil society should:

- Utilize existing networks and partnerships in the region<sup>7</sup> to strengthen relationships with stakeholders already included in the implementation of the CoP, such as the European Standards Fact-checking network.
- Continue advocating for the CoP or equivalent commitments to be 1) requested from the European Commission and regional governments and 2) accepted by the VLOPs and VLOSEs.

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<sup>7</sup> This includes already established networks and coalitions such as SEE Check (<https://www.seecheck.org>), SEE Digital Rights (<https://www.seedigitalrights.network/>), Coalition for Freedom of Expression and Content Moderation in Bosnia, etc.



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# Key Recommendations of the Thematic Working Group on Energy

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 Cooperation &  
Development  
Institute  
Instituti për Bashkëpunim  
dhe Zhvillim

 ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ  
ELIAMEP  
ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΚΕΝΤΡΟ ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΗΣ & ΕΞΩΤΕΡΙΚΗΣ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣ  
HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN & FOREIGN POLICY

Led by  
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**About the process**

These recommendations stem from consultations with stakeholders cross all Western Balkan countries and the EU within the Thematic Working Group (TWG) on Energy. Discussions focused primarily on the importance of the rule of law and human rights including the need to extend and revise the Treaty Establishing Energy Community, and a just and inclusive energy transition. The process involved two consultation meetings with 40 regional experts and other stakeholders, as well as a public conference held in September. This conference aimed to analyse the primary findings from the consultation process and to establish a set of recommendations for enhancing energy reforms. The Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute (RERI) facilitated the consultation process, alongside a core group of energy experts from each of the six Western Balkan countries.

Due to the upcoming tectonic shifts (ETS, CBAM, Energy Community Treaty expiration date) in legal frameworks governing energy systems in the region, we wish to focus on issues that need to be tackled urgently. The recommendations were prepared by the Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute (RERI), which coordinated the group, and was discussed by the wider Thematic Group and finally adopted in September 2023. In our view these two fields are: 1) the rule of law and human rights including the need to extend and revise the Treaty Establishing Energy Community, and 2) a just and inclusive energy transition. The aim is to provide a shorter list of recommendations than in 2022 and make them achievable and actionable before the next Forum in 2024.

### **Deficiencies in the energy policy context of the Western Balkan countries**

The Western Balkans region is struggling in the early stages of the energy transition. A more decisive approach is necessary to shift from fossil fuels and comply with the international obligations undertaken during the previous decade. Most of the Western Balkan region is fossil fuel dependent. In 2022, more than 30 % of electricity was produced from a single fossil fuel (coal). Coal represents almost 50% of the entire primary energy supply of the Western Balkans. The share of renewables is modest while traditional biomass accounts for 13% of total energy supply and is strongly tied to energy poverty. Energy and carbon intensity of the Western Balkans is very high and efficiency low. For example, the average carbon intensity of electricity generation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and Kosovo amounts to 1.4 tCO<sub>2</sub>/MWh, while the EU average is 0.255 tCO<sub>2</sub>/MWh.

Equally, energy import dependency of the region is below the EU average. (e.g., 27% in Bosnia and Herzegovina to 59% in North Macedonia). Historical carbon emissions from coal power plants are roughly 80 million tons annually. Electricity production is accompanied by emissions of acid gasses and particles which is greater than from all other combustion plants in Europe combined and this affects the health of all Europeans, including EU citizens. The region is, however, equivalent to only 6% of total EU ETS trading volume.

Moreover, the region currently depends on the import of the fossil gas from Russia. However, the WB countries do not rely on the supply of fossil gas at the same levels as the EU countries. In 2020, the share of fossil gas in the total energy supply of the Western Balkans was 8% (compared to 23.7% in EU).

Not all the Western Balkan countries have signed the necessary international agreements and adopted the policy decisions to provide policy infrastructure for this kind of transition. Most countries submitted their Nationally Determined Contributions to United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC.) So far, only Albania and Macedonia have adopted National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs) whereas the establishment and implementation of national monitoring reporting and verifying and the EU Emissions Trading System is still patchy across the region. Paris Agreement and the Global Methane Pledge create broad framework for decarbonisation while climate and energy targets established by the Decision of the Ministerial Council of the Energy Community No 2022/02/MC-EnC set up more concrete goals to be achieved. Energy Community

(EnC) Contracting Parties from the Western Balkans are all in the EU accession process and slowly advancing towards harmonization with the EU energy and climate legislation. All countries have made significant commitments by signing the Sofia Declaration while remaining reluctant to adopt ambitious decarbonisation commitments due to the absence of a solid investment framework.

## 1. Evaluating the State of Human Rights and the Rule of Law

The design and implementation of international obligations is a multifaceted issue. It concerns the rule of law, security of supply, investment opportunities etc. It provides the basis for strategic policy processes and reforms such as the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, a regional roadmap for achieving the energy transition towards decarbonisation. It is also tightly linked to the issue of improving the state of human rights. At the moment, citizens of the Balkans breathe heavily polluted air, their health is jeopardized, and the poorest amongst us are not being properly helped to improve their life conditions and basic wellbeing. The current state of energy systems in the Western Balkan countries do not provide the basis for their citizens to enjoy the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a basic human right, as defined by the United Nations (Resolutions from the Human Rights Council in 2021 (A/HRC/RES/48/13) and the General Assembly in 2022 (A/RES/76/300)). Western Balkan countries, as we pointed out last year, need to comply with national and international policy agendas and legal frameworks and fulfil the obligations undertaken in order to maintain and improve the rule of law.

The Energy Community Treaty (EnC) expires on 1st of July 2026. Under the existing rules and regulations governed by the Treaty, as of January next year, all power plants in the Western Balkans are at risk of illegal operation, due to high emissions of pollutants. The discrepancy between the formal adoption of EnC rules and the lack of their implementation creates a dangerous legal vacuum. To avoid that, 1) the Treaty will expire; or 2) the Treaty will be prolonged without any changes or 3) the Treaty will be amended and prolonged.

In order to evaluate the successes and challenges of the previous 20 years of implementation and assess all the options available going forward, a sound analysis is needed. Over the years, the EnC has grown and is now regulating many energy related issues which were not originally under its jurisdiction, all of which has been approved by the governments (i.e. Ministerial Council consisted of ministers of energy) of the contracting parties and not by their respective parliaments. It did not include parliaments (the European Parliament and the national parliaments of Western Balkan countries) in the negotiations, nor did it allow for non-state actors (civil society, academia, businesses) to contribute to the design of the Treaty. This assessment should engage the lawmakers as much as possible.

## Recommendations:

<b>Who</b>	European Commission; Energy Community Secretariat
<b>What</b>	<p>In order to re-establish and improve the legal framework governing the regional energy market(s), the EU should facilitate/finance an independent assessment report to the European Parliament (and the national parliaments) on the implementation of the Energy Community Treaty accompanied by a proposal for further actions in order to induce an appropriate debate on EU level.</p> <p>The report should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Offer ambitious but realistic options for coal phase out including funding options;</li> <li>▪ Asses costs and benefits of different options for ETS inclusion in the region (integration into EU ETS vs establishing regional ETS);</li> <li>▪ Asses and propose deadlines for establishing GHG monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) systems as a precondition for carbon pricing mechanism;</li> <li>▪ Asses different funding mechanisms for supporting the just and inclusive energy transition, taking into account social and economic circumstances, namely energy poverty and burden for the consumers.</li> </ul>
<b>How</b>	The development of the report should include all interested parties, including non-state actors, national parliaments and the European Parliament.
<b>Benchmark</b>	The report should be adopted by the end of 2025.
<b>Who</b>	European Commission, Energy Community, the EU and its member states, Western Balkan countries
<b>What</b>	instead of extension of the Treaty Establishing Energy Community without changes, the extension to the Treaty should include necessary amendments in order to overcome current obstacles in application of the Treaty.
<b>How</b>	Within these negotiations national parliaments and the European Parliament should be given a prominent role in monitoring, consultations and/or evaluation of the implementation. The Treaty should design a more effective and operational approach in case of breaches and non-compliance with the applicable legal and policy framework by the member states, including, but not limited to, establishment of effective enforcement of the Treaty, as well as proportional mechanisms for prevention of illegal state aid, pollution and breaching of human rights, which resulted from breaching the Treaty.
<b>Benchmark</b>	An inclusive and multistakeholder dialogue to be launched in 2024, aiming at adopting the best policy and legal options based on above mentioned assessment report.

## 2. Just and Inclusive Transition

Western Balkan countries are highly exposed to the energy security risks, climate change impacts, and are suffering from harmful emissions from fossil fuel combustion and the ever-present energy poverty. Decarbonization of the Western Balkans energy sector(s) is the least costly option to reduce overall carbon emissions and to improve air quality in the region but also in all of Europe. Fossil fuel dependency, high energy intensity and GDP per capita of the Western Balkan countries provide an opportunity for disproportionately cost-effective investments into decarbonisation. It is thus of utmost importance to provide energy operators from the Western Balkans with the market access and means to conduct investments and pursue ambitious energy transition agenda(s). Coal phase-out supported by appropriate investment efforts and led by local operators is a prerequisite for a just transition and re-development of the coal dependent regions and communities. The introduction of ETS and CBAM will make further significant impacts on the countries in the region. Kosovo and Albania will not be significantly affected by CBAM unlike other countries with significant exports from sectors covered by the CBAM. The German Watch discussion paper<sup>1</sup> concludes that the introduction of a carbon pricing mechanism for the industry and power sectors in the form of a CO<sub>2</sub> tax or an emissions trading system is the best option for WB6 countries to respond to the CBAM. It is also a measure that several of them have already announced.

Energy system needs to be decarbonized but also decentralized and democratized through the adoption of a bottom-up approach. Prosumers, citizen led renewable energy initiatives need to be supported in order to secure the supply and general energy security, support the real transition towards a decarbonised energy system. On a broader, political level, and of real importance for the Berlin Process, enabling and supporting a citizen-led energy mechanism has the potential to decisively contribute to the EU accession process. It would improve energy security and help to ease tensions related to dependence on Russian gas or Chinese loans for infrastructure. Overall, it would help solve the geopolitical challenges and regional cross border disputes and greatly enhance regional cooperation.

This approach must have energy poverty eradication as one of its goals and key measures of success. Energy poverty rates in the Western Balkans are among the highest in Europe and the rising energy prices are making it harder for citizens to cope. At its root, the issue concerns the inefficient burning of wood in outdated highly inefficient stoves. Household heating is the single largest type of energy use in the Western Balkan region. Biomass is the fuel with the largest share in residential energy use (45% in 2020), accounting for more than 60% of all energy used for heating.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> German Watch, Impacts of the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism on the Western Balkans and Ukraine: Policy Options for Governments - a Discussion Paper

<sup>2</sup> RES Foundation/The Greens/EFA, Tackling the immediate challenges of Energy Poverty in Western Balkans, the Possible Role for the EU

The situation affects the structure of energy consumption in cold winter months and produces significant losses on the grid. It affects vulnerable citizens, their quality of life and wellbeing; it disproportionately affects women; it also creates significant air pollution.<sup>3</sup> Most recently, due to the energy crisis caused by the war in Ukraine, vulnerability amongst the energy poor has become even higher. The support must be delivered first where it is most needed. Subsidies are needed for the most disadvantaged citizens. As concluded in the RES/Greens EFA study published earlier this year a number of publicly supported schemes are available for the improvement of residential energy efficiency.<sup>4</sup> Most of the available public subsidies support beneficiaries who already have income, access to retail banking, and are not considered risky customers for bank loans. However, the energy poor in the Western Balkan countries usually do not have access to commercial bank money. Hence, the existing support schemes discriminate those in poverty because the required levels of their co-investment commonly exceed their means.

To the best of our knowledge, only the Serbian Government has taken initial steps to implement the Energy Community Policy Guidelines on identifying and addressing energy poverty.<sup>5</sup> In Serbia, the National Coalition for Decreasing Energy Poverty, which notably includes representatives from civil service but also relevant non-state actors including CSOs, has adopted the definition of energy poverty. Further steps are now needed to implement the Guidelines. The Guidelines also provides recommendations on how to identify and measure the number of energy poor as a necessary first step to establish benchmarks and measure progress. The Guidelines set out short- and long-term measures on how to address energy poverty effectively in line with energy transition goals.

### Recommendations:

<b>Who</b>	EU and its member states, Western Balkan states
<b>What</b>	Establish a dedicated fund to finance economic restructuring of the coal regions from different sources (e.g. combined national and EU funds), based on the existing funding schemes of the European Commission; closely monitor the utilization of these funds to ensure that the funds are spent for the purpose for which they were granted;
<b>How</b>	An independent monitoring mechanism should be established that includes government officials, parliamentarians and civil society representatives.

<sup>3</sup> Bankwatch, Comply or Close 2023: five years of deadly legal breaches by Western Balkan coal plants

<sup>4</sup> RES Foundation/The Greens/EFA, Tackling the immediate challenges of Energy Poverty in Western Balkans, the Possible Role for the EU

<sup>5</sup> Energy Community Policy Guidelines on identifying and addressing energy poverty in the Energy Community Contracting Parties (PG 02/2022/29 Aug 2022)



<b>Who</b>	Western Balkan states
<b>What</b>	Western Balkan states should properly calculate the number of energy poor according to Energy Community Guidelines. <sup>6</sup>
<b>How</b>	It seems that the Guidelines need to be adjusted as the prescribed methodology underestimates number of citizens in the state of the energy poverty in the Western Balkans. Therefore, the design of any policy intervention needs to take this methodological challenge into account.
<b>Benchmark</b>	Guidelines implemented by all the WB states, monitored by the Energy Community Secretariat.
<b>Who</b>	Western Balkan states
<b>What</b>	Western Balkan governments should adopt national programmes to address and swiftly eradicate energy poverty.
<b>How</b>	In promptly solving the extreme energy poverty, Western Balkans governments should favour no regrets options and practical solutions (e.g. improving the efficiency of the existing stoves or enabling affordable replacement with more efficient devices). Investing in energy efficiency of the building is also desirable, but they take more time and resources. Ideally, these two measures should be implemented simultaneously. When choosing a standard for the new devices, advanced EU standards should be observed.
<b>Benchmark</b>	National programmes adopted and monitoring and reporting schemes are established.
<b>Who</b>	The EU and its member states
<b>What</b>	The EU should introduce a new dedicated programming and implementation mechanism for the Western Balkans at national level and redesign the programming of the EU support to effectively target those at risk from serious and adverse consequences of energy poverty.
<b>How</b>	The new programme should broaden its participation to non-state actors from the region with recognised experience on these issues.
<b>Budget</b>	The EU should set aside a dedicated budget for energy poverty eradication within the IPA multi-country support framework.

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<sup>6</sup> Energy Community Policy Guidelines on identifying and addressing energy poverty in the Energy Community Contracting Parties (PG 02/2022 / 29 Aug 2022)



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# Key Recommendations of the Thematic Working Group on Mobility

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dhe Zhvillim

 **ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ**  
**ELIAMEP**  
ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΕΡΩΝΕΙΑ ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΗΣ & ΕΣΤΕΡΝΗΣ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣ  
HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN & FOREIGN POLICY

Led by  
**Center Science and  
Innovation for Development  
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**About the process**

These recommendations stem from the consultation process held in the framework of the Thematic Working Group (TWG) on Mobility led by SCiDEV. The TWG deliberated on how enhanced cooperation and sustained support in mobility-driven R&I are pivotal for equipping the WB6 with the requisite tools and knowledge to address shared challenges, such as climate change and digital transformation, while curbing brain drain and fostering a generation of innovators who can reshape the region's future. Over the summer of 2023, four consultation meetings were held, bringing together a multi-disciplinary group of stakeholders (43 participants), including representatives from universities and research centres, intergovernmental organisations, civil society organisations, think tanks from the Western Balkans countries (WB6) and the EU. A final public consultation event was held in September hosting 55 participants as well as a presentation at the Joint Science Conference of the Berlin Process. The findings and recommendations were validated during advocacy visits in Berlin, Brussels and networking events in Sarajevo and Munich in September 2023.

## INTRODUCTION

Mobility and migration in the Western Balkans (WB6) have profound implications for the region and its evolving relationship with the European Union (EU). There is a pressing need to address the challenges in the region and capitalize on the potential of mobility for fostering regional development and integration into the EU. Research and innovation (R&I) and knowledge transfer in the WB6 constitute a transformative potential of accelerating sustainable growth and convergence of the WB economies with the EU, which can be attained only if the pressing challenges of R&I and mobility-driven innovation in the region are addressed in a timely and systematic manner. Even though the WB6 have made significant strides in aligning their R&I ecosystems with EU standards, steadfast support, and investment in mobility-driven R&I – both intra-regionally and with the EU – are still needed.

This policy paper addresses the state of affairs, identifies barriers and areas for improvement, and proposes concrete recommendations for the Leader's Summit of the Berlin Process. The insights presented herein are reinforced by a collaborative advocacy strategy, which seeks to engage pivotal stakeholders within the WB6 and the EU.

## STATE OF AFFAIRS IN MOBILITY-DRIVEN R&I IN WB6

Firstly, one of the main achievements of the Common Regional Market Action Plan (CRM AP) mobility agenda<sup>1</sup> is the signing of mobility agreements in the field of higher education: the Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications, and the Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Doctor of Medicine, Dentists and Architects,<sup>2</sup> which are yet to be ratified by all WB6. The two agreements have made it easier for diplomas to be recognised by shortening the approval process to a maximum of fourteen days and removing existing fees for the processing of applications. The agreements' implementation will advance the mobility of students, academics, and professionals in the WB6 and will stimulate competitiveness and cooperation among higher education institutions.

Taking this work forward, in January 2023, the Regional Cooperation Council<sup>3</sup> (RCC) prepared a draft Agreement for Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Midwives, Nurses, Pharmacists and Veterinary Surgeons, and technical negotiations were launched.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, at the Berlin Process coordination meeting that took place in May 2023 in Tirana, participants supported the initiative to negotiate a regional Agreement on Access to Study in Higher Education, aiming to boost mobility of students from the region to universities in the EU.<sup>5</sup>

The stakeholders at the consultation meetings argued that these developments could pose challenges for both national institutions and universities, including a lack of capacity in universities and questions of how EU national administrations would process the increased number of applications. In that respect, the sub-regional network of ENIC/NARIC<sup>6</sup> centres and the common information system will be instrumental for students to access updated information on the higher education system and diploma requirements in the WB6, and for national administrations to closely cooperate in facilitating the implementation of the agreements. Cooperation and greater engagement of national quality assurance bodies will be key in ensuring the quality of study programmes and to establish and maintain trust between the education systems in the Western Balkans. Until recently, regional cooperation among universities and research institutions in the WB6 often occurred via participation in European projects led by EU academic/research institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> CEFTA, Common Regional Market 2021-2024 Action Plan, Retrieved from:

<https://cefta.int/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Common-Regional-Market-2021-2024-Action-Plan.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> European Western Balkans. (2022, Nov 3) Berlin Process: Western Balkans leaders sign agreements on increased mobility, Retrieved from: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/11/03/berlin-process-western-balkans-leaders-sign-agreements-on-increased-mobility/>

<sup>3</sup> More about RCC <https://www.rcc.int/>

<sup>4</sup> RCC. (2023, March 15) Report on the activities of the Regional Cooperation Council Secretariat for the period 1 November – 1 March, Retrieved from: <https://www.rcc.int/docs/653/report-on-the-activities-of-the-regional-cooperation-council-secretariat-for-the-period-1-november-2022-1-march-2023>

<sup>5</sup> Report Berlin Process Coordination Meeting, Tirana 18-19 May 2023, Retrieved from:

[https://www.berlinprocess.de/uploads/documents/report-bp-coordination-meeting-19-may-2023-tirana\\_1692197246.pdf](https://www.berlinprocess.de/uploads/documents/report-bp-coordination-meeting-19-may-2023-tirana_1692197246.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> The ENIC-NARIC Networks are the result of an ongoing collaboration between the national information centres on academic recognition of qualifications of in total 55 countries. The national information centres are operating under the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997). The joint website of the ENIC (European Network of Information Centres in the European Region) and NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union) Networks is an initiative to enhance navigation to relevant online resources.

Secondly, while reports point to growing participation of WB6 researchers in EU research programmes, with research projects in the WB6 having tripled between 2014 and 2019 in Horizon Europe, overall, it seems, the WB6 suffers from capacity problems.<sup>7</sup> Apart from Serbia, whose performance has quadrupled making it the most successful country of the WB6,<sup>8</sup> other countries lag behind. Participation in the EU's Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) for doctoral networks, post-doctoral fellowships and staff exchanges is also low in absolute numbers.<sup>9</sup> In addition, a very limited number of researchers in the region have been awarded European Research Council grants. Moreover, participation in the European Cooperation in Science and Technology programme (COST) has increased at individual researcher level, but fewer institutions join as partners in COST actions.<sup>10</sup> Participation in European Innovation and Technology (EIT) has also improved with four different EIT Hubs are currently established in the WB6 region.

Thirdly, the Joint Science Conference of the Western Balkans Process,<sup>11</sup> initiated by the German National Academy of Sciences, Leopoldina, established a platform uniting principal stakeholders from education and science systems to discuss challenges and advancements for science systems in the Western Balkans and the broader South-East Europe. Over its span, seven meetings were conducted, culminating in 2023 in Tirana. The recommendations of this TWG are also synchronised with the Joint Science Conference.

Fourthly, in the 2017 Western Balkans Summit in Trieste, WB6 and EU leaders committed to establish the Western Balkans Research Foundation. The outline, structure and activities of the Foundation were led by Leopoldina in the framework of the Joint Science Conference. Though this was a highly appreciated development by WB6 research and innovation ecosystem stakeholders, eventually, the commitment<sup>12</sup> did not come to fruition. This led WB6 researchers to submit a petition to the EC in 2021, urging EU representatives to live up to the commitment and move forward with the establishment of the foundation. A response to this petition from the Directorate General for Research & Innovation noted that the Commission had launched a Twinning Action for the WB6 under Horizon Europe, which would help strengthen research and innovation excellence across the region.<sup>13</sup> Although such actions were welcomed by WB6 researchers, they only contribute to islands of excellence, and cannot substitute a regional entity that systematically fosters cooperation between WB6 researchers and provides for brain circulation and transfer of excellence.

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<sup>7</sup> Zubaşcu, F. (2021, August 24) Science Business Publication. Retrieved from:

<https://sciencebusiness.net/news/interest-eu-research-mobility-schemes-growing-western-balkans>

<sup>8</sup> European Commission, Research and Innovation, Retrieved from:

[https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/europe-world/international-cooperation/association-horizon-europe/serbia\\_en](https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/europe-world/international-cooperation/association-horizon-europe/serbia_en)

<sup>9</sup> Zubaşcu, F. (2021, August 24) Science Business Publication. Retrieved from:

<https://sciencebusiness.net/news/interest-eu-research-mobility-schemes-growing-western-balkans>

<sup>10</sup> Schuch, K. Patterns of geographical mobility of researchers from six Western Balkan Countries in Regional and European Mobility based training programmes, Fteval Journal for Research and Technology Policy Evaluation. Retrieved from: [https://repository.fteval.at/id/eprint/575/1/fteval\\_J52\\_10.22163\\_fteval.2021.516.pdf](https://repository.fteval.at/id/eprint/575/1/fteval_J52_10.22163_fteval.2021.516.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Leopoldina Nationale Akademie Der Wissenschaften. Western Balkans Process – Joint Science Conference. Retrieved from: <https://www.leopoldina.org/en/international/science-diplomacy/jsc/>

<sup>12</sup> Western Balkan Info Hub. (2021, May 1) Establishment of Western Balkan Research Foundation (Petition). Retrieved from: [https://wbc-rti.info/mobile/object\\_view/21783](https://wbc-rti.info/mobile/object_view/21783)

<sup>13</sup> Response to the Open Letter on the establishment of the Western Balkans Research Fund, dated 17/08/2021

Finally, research infrastructures (RIs) in the WB6 are currently underdeveloped and underused.<sup>14</sup> Participation in the pan-European RIs varies across countries, as well as across scientific fields. Although joining some pan-European RIs requires a significant level of development of the research infrastructure, participation in others can be instrumental for capacity building and modernisation,<sup>15</sup> as well as for regional and European integration. The joint efforts of the WB6 in accessing RIs in the region and EU have the potential to enhance the overall research and innovation potential of the region.<sup>16</sup> Some regional cooperation in this field has already taken place with both positive effects and identified challenges. For example, in the case of European Social Survey<sup>17</sup> ERIC, a regional network of WB institutions was established as a platform for exchange of experiences and other types of collaboration.<sup>18</sup> However, currently not all governments of the WB6 support access and membership to RIs such as the European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure (ESS ERIC).

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<sup>14</sup> Kutlača, Đ., & Živković, L. (2022). Western Balkans Research and Innovation Infrastructure Roadmap. Regional Cooperation Council. p.10, Retrieved from:

<https://www.rcc.int/download/docs/Western%20Balkans%20Research%20and%20Innovation%20Infrastructure%20Roadmap.pdf/b8cdb6603c0e7171059c5e09f2e93cc4.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> For example, CESSDA runs a mentorship program for less mature or not fully established service providers from current and potential member institutions. <https://www.cessda.eu/Strategy-Expertise/Mentorship-Programme>

<sup>16</sup> RCC, 2023, Western Balkans Research and Innovation Infrastructure Roadmap

<sup>17</sup> The European Social Survey (ESS) is implemented bi-annually, fulfilling the highest methodological standards of research in the domain of social sciences. It measures the attitudes, beliefs and behavioural patterns of diverse populations in more than thirty nations. The ESS data is available free of charge for non-commercial use.

<sup>18</sup> Western Balkans European Social Survey Regional Network.  
Retrieved from: <https://wb-europeansocialsurvey.org/>

## BARRIERS TO MOBILITY-DRIVEN RESEARCH AND INNOVATION IN WB6

Improving mobility requires tackling the demographic shifts in the WB6, particularly the migration of young and skilled people towards Western countries. In fact, sustained migration of well educated people, combined with the low likelihood of return, “jeopardises economic growth and development in the medium and long run”.<sup>19</sup> Despite improvements in human capital within the WB6,<sup>20</sup> the disparities between development and the skills gaps between Western economies and those in the region became acutely apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting once more that the region is ill-equipped to face the Fourth Industrial Revolution.<sup>21</sup> Brain drain hampers the region’s ability to drive innovation and economic progress. Addressing this issue requires not only improved domestic opportunities but also the cultivation of an environment that values local expertise.

### Lack of funding and political will

Budgetary allocations for research and development (R&D) are very low across the WB6, ranging from 0.25% in Albania to 0.9% in Serbia.<sup>22</sup> Limited R&D funding is one of the causes of the non-competitiveness of WB regional research at the European level and insufficient integration of regional research institutions into the large pan-European research infrastructures (RIs). Because of the limited funds, regional research infrastructures and facilities are outdated and mainly used for education rather than research. They are also not connected to the industrial sector.<sup>23</sup> As such, they are not able to support the knowledge accumulation and transfer that is necessary for the economic development of the region.

Some developments can be noted in the wider innovation ecosystem,<sup>24</sup> e.g. with the emergence of Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs).<sup>25</sup> However, often DIHs do not offer a full range of services.<sup>26</sup> Another missing but crucial component is the scale-up, or investment.<sup>27</sup> In fact, mobilisation of R&D funding from the private sector, e.g. through venture capital, is minimal. There is a clear need for the political leadership of WB6 to allocate substantial funds for education and scientific research, aiming to reach at least the average level of EU investments and beyond. This has been articulated in many initiatives through the years. It will be important to diversify programmes and grants to focus on increasing research capacities across the region<sup>28</sup> and promoting collaboration on joint projects.

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<sup>19</sup> Hanzl-Weiss, D., Holzner, M., Mara, I., & Pichler, D. (2020). Multi-annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area (MAP REA) in the Western Balkans - Diagnostic Report. RCC. Retrieved from: <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/111/multi-annual-ation-plan-for-a-rgional-economic-area-map-rea-in-the-western-balkans-diagnostic-report>

<sup>20</sup>As measured through the average years of schooling (Hanzl-Weiss et al., 2020, p.72)

<sup>21</sup> Schwab, K. (2016, Jan 14). The Fourth Industrial Revolution: what it means, how to respond. World Economic Forum. Retrieved in May 2021 from: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond/>

<sup>22</sup> European Training Foundation. (2023). Analysing the skills dimension of technology transfer in the Western Balkans. Retrieved from: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/document-attachments/analysing-skills-dimension-technology-transfer-western-balkans>

<sup>23</sup> Kutlača, Đ., & Živković, L. (2022). Western Balkans Research and Innovation Infrastructure Roadmap. Regional Cooperation Council. Retrieved from: <https://www.rcc.int/download/docs/Western%20Balkans%20Research%20and%20Innovation%20Infrastructure%20Roadmap.pdf/b8cdb6603c0e7171059c5e09f2e93cc4.pdf>



Increasing participation is affected by factors, including: (i) Inadequate institutional governance – Higher education institutions (HEIs) in the region, as the main anchors for scientific research, face many challenges ranging from insufficiently developed research and internationalisation strategies to severe understaffing and heavy administrative workload. Furthermore, HEIs lack financial autonomy; thus, research funding administration requires lengthy procedures involving approval at many administrative levels. This disincentivises HEIs' academic staff to pursue research activities. In the long run, it leads to a lack of long-term vision for projects (and consortia development). In addition, accreditation processes and delays are sometimes problematic. (ii) Limited project design and implementation capabilities – Capacities for project design, writing and implementation need to be improved across the region. Project teams often face administrative and management challenges due to the complex rules and regulations (particularly for tendering procedures, which are even more cumbersome for cross-regional projects). The creation of key project management documents for quality assurance, management processes, promotion and disseminations often does not meet expected quality standards (e.g. lack of indicators, milestones, responsibilities, and timelines) for a well-managed project. Partnership creation, particularly with non-academic partners, remains a challenge. Capacities for communication and dissemination of project outcomes and results also needs to be improved.<sup>29</sup>

The ability of the WB region to adopt new technologies is significantly constrained. Their competitiveness is rooted in cheap labour rather than technological advancements. This situation is further exacerbated by brain drain, which not only weakens a company's inclination to collaborate with research institutions but also undermines its capacity to adopt new technologies.

In the context of technology transfer, the provision of support services for both vertical and horizontal technology transfer is inadequate across the WB region. Although sector associations have historically offered some assistance for horizontal technology transfer, this function has not been effectively adopted by more contemporary cluster organisations.<sup>30</sup> While Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs) have emerged with the mission to encourage the adoption of digital technology across industries and companies, they are still in their nascent stages within the WB. These DIHs mainly concentrate on aiding ICT start-ups.<sup>31</sup> In order to establish an environment of equitable negotiation and balanced business relations with the EU, it is imperative to elevate the level of knowledge and scientific expertise in the WB region to match the standards of developed EU countries.

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<sup>24</sup> Kutlača, Đ., & Živković, L. (2022). Western Balkans Research and Innovation Infrastructure Roadmap. Regional Cooperation Council. Retrieved from: <https://www.rcc.int/download/docs/Western%20Balkans%20Research%20and%20Innovation%20Infrastructure%20Roadmap.pdf/b8cdb6603c0e7171059c5e09f2e93cc4.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> The European Commission describes Digital Innovation Hubs (DIHs) as one-stop shops supporting companies / public sector organisations in improving their production / service delivery processes through the use of digital technologies.

<sup>26</sup> With the full cycle including pre-incubation services, training and education activities, networking, advice on the development of new products and services.

## Effects of misaligned policy and regulation on knowledge transfer and innovation

Policy and regulatory complexities can be determinant factors in helping or hindering cooperation between academic, research institutions, innovation infrastructures and the private sector. 2022 Enlargement Package Country Reports show that the level of preparation and progress for negotiations on acquis Chapter 25: Science and Research vary across the WB6.<sup>32</sup> Knowledge transfer and smart specialisation policies/strategies are particularly relevant to mobility-driven innovation. While there is a shared emphasis on the adoption of Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) across the WB, its main focus is channelling research, development, and innovation funding towards priority sectors. Comparatively, little attention is being paid to technology transfer. Stakeholders have expressed concerns regarding the adequacy of institutional capacities to implement S3, the discrepancy in skills, and the level of collaboration with the private sector, which appears to be hesitant to engage with universities.

Efforts to update legislation related to technology and knowledge transfer in the WB6 are driven by the EU accession process. However, this area is regulated by multiple laws, making it difficult to ensure consistency when amendments are made. This is also reflected in the scattered institutional governance around innovation, knowledge transfer and mobility. Specifically, even though mobility is managed by the line ministry responsible for education, the latter is seldom responsible for industrial or smart specialisation policies. Finally, the spectrum of organisations dedicated to supporting technology transfer varies considerably across the WB6, with distinct strengths and weaknesses. Assistance for horizontal technology transfer (i.e., sharing and applying technology, knowledge, or innovations across different industries, sectors, or fields) remains limited.<sup>35</sup> More remains to be done to connect the ‘islands of excellence’ within the region and also with the EU.

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<sup>27</sup> RCC. (2021). Mapping of digital innovation hubs, and identification of needs within Western Balkans and of prospective regional cooperation actions. Retrieved from: <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/130/mapping-of-digital-innovation-hubs-and-identification-of-needs-within-western-balkans-and-of-prospective-regional-cooperation-action>

<sup>28</sup> European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency. (2020.) Erasmus+, Capacity building in higher education (CBHE) action – Regional report – Western Balkans, Publications Office. Retrieved from: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/503574>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> European Training Foundation. (2023). Analysing the skills dimension of technology transfer in the Western Balkans. Retrieved from: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/document-attachments/analysing-skills-dimension-technology-transfer-western-balkans>

<sup>31</sup> European Training Foundation. (2023). Analysing the skills dimension of technology transfer in the Western Balkans. Retrieved from: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/document-attachments/analysing-skills-dimension-technology-transfer-western-balkans>

**Lack of consistency in taking forward measures and establishing dialogue**

The consultation meetings highlighted that there appears to be a lack of consistent effort in implementing measures and initiating fruitful dialogue. Entities such as the EC, as well as other donor-supported initiatives, often prioritise their own agendas, leading to a mismatch between the support they offer and the actual needs or expectations of the Western Balkans. This inconsistency can be best exemplified by the case of the Western Balkans Research Fund. After the consolidation of its concept, the initiative was swiftly overshadowed by a different EU-backed programme, despite the former's potential significance to the region. This kind of abrupt shift not only disrupts local efforts but also further alienates stakeholders in the region.

In addition, stakeholders raised concerns about a pervasive oversight in considering the institutional fragility that characterises the WB6. The governmental institutions within these nations suffer from corruption, and the public administrative bodies are riddled with nepotism and political affiliations. Such endemic issues severely limit these institutions' ability to react promptly and enact measures conducive to societal and institutional growth.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the message of this thematic working group is “finance and support the ecosystem of research and innovation in WB6 through: (i) a comprehensive intra-regional mobility framework agreement; (ii) dedicated and customised funding schemes for research and innovation; and (iii) mobility-driven knowledge transfers and scientific cooperation within the WB and with the EU for sustained economic growth and resilient societies and accelerating integration of the region in the European Research Area”.

- Support and incentivise **intensified collaboration, mobility, knowledge transfer and access to infrastructure in research and innovation ecosystem within the WB6 and with the EU through a paradigm shift** where the WB6 does not simply catch up with its European counterparts but collaborates in paving the path forward and addressing shared challenges, such as building resilient societies, climate change and digital transformation.
- **Commit to facilitate and finance the establishment of a comprehensive all inclusive regional mobility framework agreement** including students, researchers, university administrative staff, experts in the research and innovation ecosystem and professionals in related areas within the Western Balkans. This framework agreement must be dedicated and customised to the specific contextual needs and priorities of the WB6, paving the way for strengthened regional collaboration, knowledge transfer and access to infrastructure in R&I ecosystem within the region.
- The EU should consider again to **support and co-finance the establishment of a Western Balkans Research Fund** as a dedicated mechanism through specific granting and supporting schemes on mobility, knowledge transfer, access to infrastructure and engagement of diaspora in R&I ecosystem within the WB6 and with the EU, thus addressing the current shortcomings of the Widening Participation and Horizon Europe programmes and levelling up the capacities for science, research, and innovation of the region.
- **Support the creation and consolidation of regional digital information hubs across all the WB6 region.** This would reinforce digital collaboration and research synergy between the WB6 and the EU, but also with the private sector, academia, and policymakers. This should also include strengthening, supporting and incentivising the Horizon Europe National Contact Points in WB6.

## Key recommendations to WB6 Governments:

- WB6 governments must commit to **increase the percentage of investment in research and innovation up to 2% of GDP by 2030** to nurture a generation of researchers, experts, innovators and thinkers who can redefine the region's future, provide avenues for brain circulation, and attract talents by engaging with peers in the region, EU and diaspora.
- WB6 governments must commit to **the implementation of a comprehensive intra-regional mobility framework agreement** including students, researchers, university administrative staff, experts in the research and innovation ecosystem and professionals in related areas within the Western Balkans, dedicated to and customised to the specific contextual needs and priorities of the Western Balkans. This will pave the way for strengthened regional collaboration, knowledge transfer and access to infrastructure in the research and innovation ecosystem within the region. It will also accelerate integration in the European Research Area, and contribute to curb brain drain by offering globally relevant opportunities locally and regionally.
- WB6 governments must commit to and co-finance **the establishment of a Western Balkans Research Fund** as a dedicated mechanism through specific granting and supporting schemes on mobility, knowledge transfer, access to infrastructure and engagement of diaspora in research and innovation ecosystem within the WB6 and with the EU, thus levelling up the capacities for science, research, and innovation of the region.
- WB6 Governments must **allocate sufficient financial resources and incentivise the integration of national and regional research infrastructures into pan-European Research Infrastructures and networks**. This implies ensuring that core expenses, like membership fees and primary activities, are catered for by the national research and innovation budgets. A concrete step is for the **WB6 governments to include in their policy agenda the finances for participation in the European Social Survey by 2024**, ensuring the participation in Round 12 of the European Social Survey for the region, contributing to informed policies and high-quality research.
- WB6 governments should **intensify their commitment to implementing the Common Regional Market Action Plan, specifically focusing on the research and innovation ecosystem and higher education quality assurance**. Governments should take steps to allow for automatic (national) accreditation of joint programmes, accredited according to the European approach (as defined in the Yerevan declaration) by a European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) accredited member.



CIVIL  
SOCIETY  
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2023

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OCTOBER



# Key Recommendations of the Thematic Working Group on Politics of Enlargement

**OPEN SOCIETY  
FOUNDATIONS**  
WESTERN BALKANS

 Cooperation &  
Development  
Institute  
Instituti për Bashkëpunim  
dhe Zhvillim

 **ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ  
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ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΚΕΝΤΡΟ ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΗΣ & ΕΞΩΤΕΡΙΚΗΣ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣ  
HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN & FOREIGN POLICY

Led by  
**The Hellenic Foundation for  
European and Foreign Policy  
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**Reviewer**

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**About the process**

This paper is prepared in the framework of the run-up activities for the Berlin Process Civil Society Forum 2023. It aims to take stock of the current ideas and initiatives to re-incentivize the EU enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans, in particular by considering avenues for addressing the key political issues that stand in the way. To that effect, it includes and builds on the consultations with a broad group of experts from the Western Balkans and EU Member States, which took place between June and September 2023. The process involved three consultation meetings with 42 stakeholders, as well as an in-person public conference with 144 attendees. The Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) facilitated the consultation process, alongside a core group of experts.

## A NEW MOMENTUM FOR ENLARGEMENT

Russia's aggression towards Ukraine in February 2022 served as “an awakening moment for Europe, a moment to reinvigorate the enlargement process in order to anchor the Western Balkans firmly to the EU”.<sup>1</sup> The new reality of a war on the European continent imposed a new logic that EU enlargement would serve well the geopolitical and security interests of the EU. The resulting new momentum, primarily driven by Ukraine's accession and the EU's desire to respond to Russia's ambitions, has led to re-open the issues that have inhibited the enlargement process in the past decade.

Experts agree that enlargement has been one of the most successful policies shaping the EU in the course of its creation. Nevertheless, **so-called enlargement fatigue and national politics on both the side of the EU and Western Balkan countries have led the region's EU integration into a vicious circle:** lack of reforms, lack of progress in the negotiations and in turn lack of incentive for further reforms. The duration of the accession process for the Western Balkans has overstretched to a point where the link between the political effort at the national level and the reward of membership is broken.<sup>2</sup> The new momentum created by the Russian aggression, if well understood and managed, could lead to fixing the link in order to make the region's accession perspective more tangible.

The open-ended horizon for further enlargement, conveniently set by the EU due to its internal struggle to reach a consensus among Member States, has proven to be the perfect excuse for political elites in the Western Balkan countries not to implement the reform agenda. Instead, they have engaged mostly in “façade” reforming. Hence, the key challenge in de-blocking EU enlargement policy consists in finding ways of incentivising candidate countries, while at the same time addressing the concerns of (reluctant) Member States.<sup>3</sup> **Finding the right balance between the technical processes, the strategic approach and political commitment, between what needs to be done at the EU level and at the level of the candidate countries could lead to a virtuous instead of a current vicious cycle in EU enlargement policy.**

The key precondition for advancing the Western Balkans' EU integration is political commitment. On the side of the EU, the commitment implies implementing internal adjustments (institutional, budgetary, policy and decision-making) to accept new members and reforming enlargement policy. On the side of the Western Balkans, the commitment should translate into incentivizing domestic reforms, taking “ownership” of the accession process and a proactive attitude to seize the current momentum. While the reality is challenging on both sides, enlargement policy should be shaped in a way to support those acceding countries that actually deliver.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/north-macedonia/hrvp-borrell-skopje-north-macedonia-and-western-balkans-are-strategic\\_en?s=229](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/north-macedonia/hrvp-borrell-skopje-north-macedonia-and-western-balkans-are-strategic_en?s=229)

<sup>2</sup> Mirel.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/a-template-for-staged-accession-to-the-eu/> - revised version



**EU's internal adjustments (institutional, policy, budgetary and decision-making), implementing reforms in and by the Western Balkan countries and the resolution of bilateral disputes are the key aspects where strong political will is needed to advance enlargement.** They are all lengthy and complex processes, thus the recommendations below propose to work on all the tracks in parallel.

## **REVAMP ENLARGEMENT POLICY: EXTRAORDINARY TIMES CALL FOR EXTRAORDINARY MEASURES**

**We urge the Council to explore the possibility for qualified majority voting on decisions regarding intermediary steps in the EU enlargement process.** The EU's internal reform aims to ensure that the EU is functional with more members. In that context, we see decision-making in the Council bodies as one of the main aspects in the reform that could also reinvigorate the accession process. Amidst the ongoing discussion on introducing qualified majority voting (QMV) in foreign policy, there have already been studies regarding the 'passerelle clauses', subject to political will of Member States to vote unanimously on adopting this option, including by the European Parliament. Nevertheless, given current divisions among Member States on QMV in foreign policy and the risk for a stalemate it could entail, it is important to consider increased flexibility in decision-making in enlargement policy separately.

More flexibility in decision-making in the Council bodies will provide an impetus for candidate countries to implement the necessary reforms. It will decrease the bureaucracy, as Member States will no longer need to approve every single technical step (opening/closing of chapters and clusters, verification of benchmarks) and eliminate the possibility for veto on these steps. However, Member States will maintain their prerogative to suspend the process under justified conditions (e.g., weak delivery or backsliding in the reforms), and will have the final say through the final approval and ratification of the accession treaty.

**The Council should announce the start of an accelerated accession process for all (potential) candidate countries.** The accelerated process would only guarantee membership to those countries who fulfil the necessary criteria and would not be a side door for those countries that are not ready. Instead, it would constitute a concrete push to the countries that are committed to implement the reforms and deserve to join in the nearest possible future. It will incentivize the reform agenda across all the clusters, under the European Commission services' close guidance and monitoring. A faster accession process, following years of being stuck on the backburner or being blocked by specific Member States, would restore trust in EU's credibility in the Western Balkan countries.

**Set a target date for both the EU and candidate countries to finish their internal reforms.** The year 2030 mentioned as a target for the EU to be ready to admit new members, both by the President of the European Council Charles Michel and the European Parliament, has great potential to incentivize the Western Balkan countries to deliver and advance in fulfilling the membership criteria. The 2030 Agenda is to be understood as the "best case scenario" when the most advanced

and reformist countries could finish their accession process and should provide common understanding of the shortest possible horizon to consider next enlargement rounds.

**The European Commission should prepare individual accession action plans (AAPs) in coordination with the candidate countries.** Such a practice was already introduced in Croatia's and North Macedonia's accession in 2000s in the form of Accession Partnerships adopted by the Council. The AAPs should include individual country priorities under a specific timeframe (ex. 3-5 years). In more sensitive areas, such as rule of law, stricter conditionality and an additional verification period could be envisaged to ensure that implementation is satisfactory. The reporting process and mechanisms should be adjusted accordingly, to allow for more flexible and real-time monitoring of specific policy areas. That way advancements (or backsliding) will be noted in a more timely manner, in order for the process to move to the next level or alternatively undertake remedial measures.

**The European Commission should introduce intermediary milestones related to the individual AAPs to put forward concrete incentives.** Such milestones should be based on the progress that candidate countries make in related policies and provide an incentive to implement the needed reforms by re-establishing the link between the reforms (effort) and membership (reward). They could come in the form of increased market access, funding, participation in various policy and decision-making processes.

## **ENCOURAGE DELIVERY ON THE KEY ASPECTS IN THE ACCESSION PROCESS**

**The (potential) candidate countries should revamp their own attitude towards domestic reforms and changes in enlargement policy. They should demonstrate political commitment and proactive attitude, build domestic consensus and resilience against domestic and foreign influences that may undermine their EU integration process.**

**Dispute resolution efforts should run in parallel to the implementation of the AAPs.** The use of veto for issues unrelated to the enlargement criteria (such as in the case of North Macedonia) has caused serious damage to the prospects for the EU to become a genuinely geopolitical player. It has created frustration in the Western Balkans at government and grassroots levels and has paved the way for increased influence of EU's competitors, including but not limited to Russia and China.

The EU's position has been that bilateral disputes must be resolved prior to accession. This approach completely neglects the asymmetric position of countries in the negotiation process in disputes between candidates and Member States. It also disregards the already tangible evidence that interaction within the EU context leads to building mutual confidence and ties, fostering

more favourable conditions for dispute resolution.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, if the resolution of – or progress in bilateral disputes were tied to tangible advancements in the EU accession, it would increase the incentive of countries to compromise.

With the exception of border disputes, the EU lacks a strategy or institutional mechanism to address bilateral issues.<sup>5</sup> It should re-think its role in the mediation processes on the basis of lessons learnt in both resolved and pending disputes (North Macedonia's disputes with Greece and Bulgaria, as well as the Serbia-Kosovo issue).<sup>6</sup> Member States should refrain from using the veto on enlargement policy over bilateral issues and should seek for other ways to resolve their disputes with candidate countries, outside the enlargement process. A specific blueprint should be developed for each candidate country, where this is necessary, which would include the involvement of competent international organisations and independent mediation/arbitration as needed. This would build on the work done in the framework of the Berlin Process under the Austrian Presidency in 2015.

**The Council should enable the Commission to make use of the existing mechanisms for immediate reporting and triggering of sanctions for violations or backsliding in the area of rule of law.** More effective and sustainable measures should be undertaken to ensure that the fundamental values enshrined in Article 2 of the TEU are upheld and to prevent, to the extent possible, backsliding after membership. The accession process, including of the most formally advanced candidate countries, has had only minor effects to improve rule of law. As the January 2022 European Court of Auditors report found, “while EU action has contributed to reforms in technical and operational areas, such as improving the efficiency of the judiciary and the development of relevant legislation, it has had little overall impact on fundamental rule of law reforms in the region”.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, rule of law has become a thorny issue inside the EU itself, as backsliding in some EU Members States has fuelled suspicion towards the potential of candidate countries to reach the necessary standards.

The mechanism should be direct and automatic to avoid political calculations and the trap of stabilitocracy. The financial cuts in the EU assistance should not be deducted from the balance of the specific country in question, but from the balance sheet of the specific government. These funds should instead be allocated to CSOs and other actors who have the capacity to contribute to redress the situation, support structural reforms and enhance the pro-democratic transformative capacity of Western Balkan societies.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.alda-europe.eu/library/news128/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/eu-enlargement-and-the-resolution-of-bilateral-disputes-in-the-western-balkans/>

<sup>6</sup> Armakolas, forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications?did=60343#:~:text=Report-,Special%20Report%2001%2F2022%3A%20EU%20support%20for%20the%20rule%20of,despite%20efforts%2C%20fundamental%20problems%20persist&text=Rule%20of%20law%20is%20one,necessary%20condition%20for%20EU%20membership.>

**The role of civil society in the accession process should be strengthened.** The consultation frameworks adopted by national governments throughout the region in practice are a “ticking the box” exercise and need to be thoroughly reformed to ensure meaningful civil society involvement throughout the policy cycle.

CSOs should be involved in the dialogue between the government and the EU services on regular basis or invited to back-to-back consultation meetings (ex. SAA bodies, screening and negotiation meetings, WBIF and National Investment Committees). Their efforts in producing shadow reports of the AAPs should be recognized and taken into account by the governments. They should be fed into the Commission’s reporting and also be disseminated and explained at the national level. Governments in the EU and the Western Balkans and EU institutions should also support building the capacity of grassroots initiatives to strengthen and add new channels in the bilateral (EU-Western Balkans) communication and cooperation.

## **ENSURE ALL THE PRECONDITIONS ARE IN PLACE TO SUPPORT ENLARGEMENT**

**Both the European Commission and Western Balkan national governments should increase the resources devoted to enlargement and the implementation of the AAPs.** Capacity to transpose and implement the *acquis* is crucial for all the Western Balkan countries to be able to fulfil membership requirements, especially if they would all be able to start the accession process and work across all areas. The European Commission must also be able to respond to the challenges outlined in the previous sections and of providing more intensive country-specific guidance, support and continuous monitoring of the individual AAPs. Given the strategic importance of the enlargement policy and the increasingly different situation in separate regions in the EU neighbourhood (Western Balkans, Eastern and Southern Partnership), there should be a separate DG to deal with enlargement policy. The involvement of line DGs in the process should also be strengthened, to provide continuous support to counterparts in line ministries in the Western Balkans.

**National governments in the Western Balkans should develop and implement specific plans for public administration reform (PAR), depolitization, professionalization and fight against corruption.** Given the importance of PAR for the overall negotiation process and its high dependence on the political will of Western Balkan governments, such plans should be adopted and implemented in the course of 2024, as a precondition for the start of the implementation of the AAPs.

**The European Commission, through its representations in individual Member States, should engage in tailored campaign to address the specific concerns of citizens in relation to EU enlargement, be it in the EU or the Western Balkan region.** Such campaigns should serve to debunk the “myths”, counter populism and build support for EU enlargement. Member States’ governments and parliaments are also encouraged to communicate more with their citizens on enlargement issues.

**The EU Delegations in the candidate countries should inform citizens about the novelties in the accession process, the direct link between the EU's support for the reforms and the reforms positive socio-economic impact in acceding countries, as well as the actual progress in the accession.** Cases of lack of political will to implement the reforms and/or backsliding should also be explained and clearly put forward to encourage national actors (civil society, citizens, opposition parties etc.) to seek for accountability. National governments and parliaments of (potential) candidate states should provide objective arguments about the accession process, its benefits and costs, and work on building national consensus in their countries on the need to implement the accession reforms.



14 / 15  
OCTOBER



# Key Recommendations of the Thematic Working Group on Security and Geopolitics

**OPEN SOCIETY  
FOUNDATIONS**  
WESTERN BALKANS

 **Cooperation &  
Development  
Institute**  
Instituti për Bashkëpunim  
dhe Zhvillim

 **ΕΛΙΑΜΕΠ  
ELIAMEP**  
ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΕΡΩΝΟΛΟΓΙΟ ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΗΣ & ΕΞΩΤΕΡΙΚΗΣ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣ  
HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN & FOREIGN POLICY

Led by  
**Kosovar Center for Security Studies  
(Kosovo)**

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Dr Ramadan Ilazi and Dr Adelina Hasani

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Dr Andi Hoxhaj,  
Dr Christian Hagemann, Dr Marina Vulović, and Walter Kemp

**Reviewer**

Isabelle Ioannides

**About the process**

These recommendations stem from consultations with security experts across all Western Balkan countries within the Thematic Working Group (TWG) on Security and Geopolitics. Discussions focused primarily on how to foster regional security cooperation. The process involved three consultation meetings with 50 regional security experts and other stakeholders, as well as a public conference held in Pristina with 51 attendees. This conference aimed to analyse the primary findings from the consultation process and to establish a set of recommendations for enhancing regional security cooperation. The Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) facilitated the consultation process, alongside a core group of security experts from each of the six Western Balkan countries.

What became evident throughout the discussions was that Russia's brutal invasion in Ukraine has underscored the urgency of Euro-Atlantic integration for the Western Balkan countries. Strengthening and invigorating security cooperation in the Western Balkans plays a significant role in the countries' aspirations to join both the EU and NATO (for those who are not members yet and/or do not wish to join). Three out of the six countries in the region are already NATO members, while four countries are engaged in accession talks with the EU. The alignment of Western Balkans countries with the EU's common foreign and security policy (CFSP) and the common security and defence policy (CSDP) is crucial in the context of security and geopolitical developments, particularly following Russia's brutal invasion in Ukraine.

Numerous internal and external challenges impede regional security cooperation in the Western Balkans. These challenges include organised crime, corruption, lack of meaningful rule of law reforms, malign foreign influences, and unresolved bilateral disputes. These factors contribute to ethno-political radicalization, erode trust, and hinder cooperation among security institutions in the region. These domestic challenges are further complicated by internal dynamics in the European Union (EU), including the rise of far-right populism, as well as socio-economic challenges, such as high-inflation, political and economic ramifications of Russian invasion of Ukraine, consequences of Covid-19 pandemic, etc. This not only casts uncertainty over the Western Balkans' future EU accession perspective but also poses challenges to the broader EU project itself.

Cooperation or investment in infrastructure development projects has become a prime source of potential foreign malign influence in the Western Balkans, such as the case in **Montenegro, Serbia as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina**. This results in detrimental consequences, potentially affecting the EU connectivity agenda. Many of these projects have been marred by corruption scandals or a disregard for EU rules and standards. This can be attributed to the accessibility of funds, particularly in the case of Chinese loans.

Disinformation campaigns and propaganda, distorting public discourse and shaping narratives are another prevalent source of malign foreign influence. Counteracting this necessitates media empowerment, strengthening democratic resilience, and bolstering the capacities of media organisations to counter disinformation efforts. But also, media organisations should achieve greater transparency in ownership structures, respectively openly sharing information about who the true owners of media organizations are. This will further strengthen media credibility and integrity.

**Organized crime and corruption**, represents a significant holistic threat for the Western Balkans. This constitutes a transnational menace that necessitates cross-border collaboration and a comprehensive and coordinated response. In line with the **Declaration on Strengthening Cooperation in Countering Transnational Organized Crime**, adopted during the OSCE Ministerial Council meeting in Tirana in December 2020, as well as other pertinent commitments, we strongly urge governments to facilitate cooperation among all relevant stakeholders, including public institutions and civil society organizations.



Achieving reconciliation within and between societies in the Western Balkans stands as a central goal of the Berlin Process, as defined in the 2014 Declaration of the German Chair. A pivotal achievement in this process has been the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) in 2016. The recognition of reconciliation's significance for the region's EU integration took place during the informal meeting of WB6 Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Sarajevo on 16 March 2018.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have the potential to enhance regional security cooperation in the Western Balkans, even if it is important to recognise that they are not a panacea for the complex challenges facing the region, as outlined above. Resolving the persisting problems/conundrums in the countries of the region requires perseverance, committed political will and leadership.

### To the governments of the Western Balkan countries:

- 1. Political leaders from the Western Balkan countries should commit to altering their tone and language when communicating with each other and in general when referring to other countries and citizens in the Western Balkans, as well as to minorities and other ethnic groups in their own country.** Accordingly, a shift in the political discourse in the Western Balkans should prioritise reconciliation, empathy, and cooperation. The use of inflammatory language by the region's leaders is a fundamental factor perpetuating political extremism and ethno-political radicalization in the Western Balkans.
- 2. During 2024, the national authorities in the Western Balkans should focus on establishing a screening mechanism for Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), or at least agree on regionally accepted standards for screening of investments.** This is important to foster resilience against corrosive capital, linked to corruption vulnerabilities linked to domestic and foreign investments. Development of regional guidance criteria and procedures for screening mechanisms at the economy level for quick reaction to FDI concerns based on the emerging EU standards, is already part of EU's commitment to supporting Common Regional Market (CRM), which was agreed by all Western Balkan countries at the Sofia Summit in 2020. Also, it is important for the Western Balkans governments to extend their analysis to investments linked to politically exposed individuals and organized crime networks.
- 3. The Western Balkans governments must prioritize alignment with the EU's Regulation 2019/452 and report on the progress at the next Berlin Process Summit.** Western Balkans governments should exchange information as well as cooperate with each other and the European Commission for screening FDIs or investments in general. In this context, the issue of beneficial ownership, as already noted in this study by IRI's Western Balkans on Threats to Democracy, is of a particular relevance. We urge all countries in the region to establish

beneficial ownership registries and to improve the ability of countries to cross-reference this information.

**4. During 2024, the Berlin Process – Security Commitments Steering Group should publish its annual assessment of progress on implementation of the commitments of the Western Balkan governments to cooperate on security threats facing the region.** At the Western Balkans Summit of the Berlin Process, held in London in July 2018, the governments of the Western Balkans committed themselves to strengthening connectivity and co-operation within the region in the fields of serious and organised crime, terrorism, cybersecurity, and other threats. Furthermore, they agreed to a Joint Declaration on strengthening information exchange between law enforcement agencies; to a Call to Action to end forced labour, modern slavery, and human trafficking; and to a Small Arms and Light Weapons Initiative Road Map (SALW). The six governments of the Western Balkans also agreed to establish a Berlin Process – Security Commitments Steering Group to monitor the delivery of these commitments. One of the roles of this Steering Group is to “Compil[e] a joint annual assessment of progress made ahead of subsequent Berlin Process summits”. Such an assessment progress report should be made public and encourage discussion.

**5. Given evolving geopolitical situations, including events in Afghanistan, Russian invasion in Ukraine, as well as recent mass shootings in the Western Balkans, the countries in the region should revise national arms control legislation to harmonize with the EU legal framework becomes crucial for bolstering regional security.** The harmonization with the EU norms **should be completed by 2026**, curtailing illicit movement of SALW and ammunition. Despite the "Sustainable solution to illegal Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in the Western Balkans by 2024: Roadmap," comprehensive mechanisms are not yet in place. In May 2023, the European Commission hosted a high-level meeting in Brussels to discuss the implementation of the Western Balkans SALW Control Roadmap, and HR/VP Josep Borrell stated that “there is not going to be a safe European Union without a stable, strong and peaceful Western Balkans”. The review of SALW is planned for 2024, and the Council of the EU decided in 2022 to allocate additional €4 million euros to its implementation.

**6. During 2024 all countries of the Western Balkans should conclude cooperation agreements with the European Public Prosecutor's Office.** This would contribute to the strengthening of the rule of law in the Western Balkans as well as strengthen democratic resilience. A strong rule of law is essential for preventing and mitigating malign foreign influence, organised corruption and crime, as well as promoting peace and security in the Western Balkans.

**To the partner countries of the Berlin Process and the European Union (EU):**

**1. The European Union (EU) should establish a financial facility solely dedicated to supporting reconciliation projects in the Western Balkans.** For the new legislative term, the European Commission/DG-NEAR should put forward a proposal for the establishment of such a programme, under IPA, Global Europe, or another adequate instrument. Despite some progress, prioritizing reconciliation efforts in the Western Balkans is urgent. Competing narratives within Western Balkan societies, notably in Kosovo, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, regarding the brutal wars of the 1990s, continue to hinder progress in reconciliation, as recent events have reminded everyone. Conflictual relations at governmental level feed political disputes among regional leaders that also trickles down to the communities, impeding reconciliation. This new facility should lead to the implementation of a reconciliation roadmap, with specific milestones targeted for completion by 2030. Drawing inspiration from the PEACE Programme in Northern Ireland, established by the European Commission on 7 December 1994, the objective of the programme should be to increase people-to-people contacts among Western Balkan societies and counter narratives that promote hate-speech.

**2. During 2024, the European Commission should draft propose concrete measures on the integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU's Digital Single Market and cybersecurity framework, as expressed by President of the European Commission von der Leyen.** In this context, a detailed action plan should be presented to achieve this goal at the 2025 Berlin Process summit, respectively for integration of the Western Balkans in the work of the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), as well as in the EU Cybersecurity Incident Review Mechanism.

**3. During 2024, the European Commission invite WB6 to join the EU Rule of Law Report Mechanism as well as the EU Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation.** In the 2023 State of the Union address, European Commission President von der Leyen suggested that accession countries should also be included in the Rule of Law Report Mechanism. This would allow WB6, akin to the current 27 EU Member States, to undergo assessments based on the same set of benchmarks across four critical areas related to the rule of law: the justice system, anti-corruption measures, media pluralism and freedom, and other institutional aspects linked to checks and balances. Additionally, this expansion would strengthen dialogue between the European Commission, national parliaments and governments, civil society, and other stakeholders in the Western Balkans, with a specific focus on rule of law. It would promote rule of law and empower civil society in the Western Balkans that often lack structured and constructive engagement with the national institutions on rule of law matters.

**4. At the next Berlin Process Summit, leaders should discuss an assessment report of the implementation of the anti-corruption pledges agreed by WB6 at the 2018 London Summit, and revise pledges (if necessary) in order to better address new risks, as well as emerging vulnerabilities towards corruption in the region related to large-scale infrastructure projects.** Discussions should build on existing civil society monitoring and evaluation reports.

**To the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC):**

**1. The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) should assess regional security cooperation initiatives in the Western Balkans and propose concrete recommendations/options for rationalization and inclusiveness of initiatives at the next Berlin Process Summit.** The rationalization process should be based on the principle of having fewer, but more effective, empowered, and inclusive mechanisms. The fact that Kosovo is not a party to most regional cooperation initiatives is a detriment to regional security cooperation.

**To civil society organisations:**

**1. Civil society organisations in the Western Balkans must increase their activities to monitor the implementation by the Western Balkan governments of the commitments agreed upon in the framework of the Berlin Process.** Considering the growing significance of building cyber-resilience for the Western Balkans, civil society organisations should produce an annual monitoring report of adherence of the Western Balkans with the Berlin Declaration on Digital Society and Value-based Digital Government.

**2. Investing in media is important to strengthen democratic resilience, and in this context developing capacities of the media organization to counter disinformation efforts by malign state and non-state actors is essential.** Malign foreign influence often relies on disinformation campaigns and propaganda to distort public discourse and shape narratives. By spreading fake news and propaganda, these actors aim to manipulate public perception and expand security and governance vulnerabilities in the WB6. Media freedom, an essential pillar of democracy, has faced a distressing decline in certain countries in the Western Balkans due to mounting government pressure. The increased vulnerability of media to succumb to external influences is a direct consequence of such pressures. It is crucial to highlight this concern as an integral component of the democracy criteria for EU accession.

**3. Civil society organisations should increase deepen their research into ethno-political radicalization and far-right activities in the Western Balkans.** Political extremism and ethno-political radicalization are increasing in the Western Balkans, as the cases of Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina shows, with the region being exploited as a platform for far-right mobilisation within the EU, often coordinated with Russian state and non-state actors: "There is no doubt that the Russian regime and Wagner in particular interact regularly with various Balkan radicals." Closer monitoring and in-depth research are required to comprehend and address these phenomena. Increased financial support from the EU and regional governments for such initiatives, especially bottom-up reconciliation efforts, is significant.

# Annex 2

## List of participants at CSF

#CSFTirana2023

## List of participants at CSF

Abi Dodbiba; Adea Kondirolli; Adelheid Feilcke; Adelina Hasani; Adnan Cerimagic; Adrijana Lavchiska; Afërdita Pustina; Agim Selami; Aida Lahi; Ainura Bekkoenova; Alba Cela; Alban Hashani; Albana Agastra; Aleksandar Bogoevski; Aleksandar Brezar; Aleksandar Ivković; Aleksandar Kovačević; Aleksandar Krzhalovski; Aleksandra Cvetanovska; Aleksandra Sanjevic; Aleksandra Tomanic; Alexandra Voudouri; Alias Sergio; Alma Jani; Ambre Fabienne Maucorps; Amina Murić; Ana Krstinovska; Ana Milojević; Anastas Mishev; Andi Dobrushki; Andrea Goertler; Andrej Zorko; Andrijana Ristovska; Angjelina Pistoli; Ani Ruci; Anja Bosilkova-Antovska; Anja Quiring; Antje Müller; Arbër Ademi; Ardian Hackaj; Ardita Abazi Imeri; Arnulf Knorr; Arsild Tepelija; Artan Kotro; Artela Mitrushki; Artan Demhasaj; Aulona Bytyqi; Bence József Gombor; Bernard Zeneli; Bernhard Fabianek; Bledar Feta; Blendi Ceka; Blendi Çeka; Blendi Salaj; Blerjana Bino; Blerta Begisholli; Bojan Marichikj; Bojana Selakovic; Boris Raonic; Buschle Dirk; Çelik Rruplli; Damir Ramovic; Daniel Prroni; Daniela Kortoçi; Darina Doebler; Darko Brkan; Denis Piplaš; Dirk Allert; Ditmir Bushati; Donika Emini; Đorđe Bojović; Dosti Banushi; Dragan Minovski; Dragana Djurica; Draško Boljević; Dren Puka; Drita Abdiu Halili; Dritan Nelaj; Dritan Shano; Dukagjin Hyseni; Dusan Sabic; Elda Bajraktari; Elda Kalaja; Elena Petkovska; Elena Simonovska; Elona Mullahi (Koçi); Elvin Gjevori; Emir Velic; mir Zulejhic; Eneida Guria; Engjellushe Morina; Eniana Kociaj; Erion Gjatolli; Erjona Curraj; Ermelinda Mahmutaj; Erni Kocani; Errita Bejtullahu; Ersal Prifti; Evadiola Gjata; Fatjona Mejdini; Fatmir Curri; Fedo Hagge-Kubat; Fiona Imami; Florensa Haxhi; Franc Terihati; Françeska Muço; Frauke Seebass; Gentian Elezi; Gentiola Madhi; Georgi Stoytchev; Geron Kamberi; Giulia Cretti; Hanan Kovacevic; Hedvig Morvai; Hristina Vojvodić; Igli Bisha; Igli Hasani; Igor Stiks; Ilir Bejtja; Ilva Tare; Ines Muçostepa; Ioannis Vlassis; Ionuț Sibian; Ivana Vojinovic; Jadranka Ivanova; Jela Rodoni; Jelena Djokic; Jelena Dzankic; Jesmina Sengla; Jeton Zulfaj; Johannes Heidecker; Jonas Andersson; Jonas Kepi; Jonida Smaja; Jorida Tabaku; Jorn Fleck; Josip Brkić; Jovana Marovic; Jože Smole; Karl Bergner; Katarina Tadic; Kiril Ristovski; Kleona Muka; Klodiana Kapo; Klodjan Seferaj; Kozma Seferaj; Krisela Hackaj; Lea Ypi; Ledjon Shahini; Lejdi Dervishi; Leonid Blloshmi; Leonora Kryeziu; Linda Pustina; Linda Rama; Lirim Krasniqi; Lisa Cowey; Lisa Homel; Liza Gashi; Ljiljana Ristevska; oneta Progni; Lorena Sekiraqa; Lucian Brujan; Luena Ikononi; Lukas Macek; Lulzim Peci; Lura Limani; Lutfi Dervishi; Maida Ćulahović; Maja Piscevic; Majlinda Bregu; Marigona Shabiu; Marija Cosic; Marija Fileva; Marija Mirchevska; Marika Djołai; Marin Lessenski; Mario Andonovski; Mario Prendi; Mario Ringov; Mariola Qesaraku; Marjan Zabrchanec; Marta Szpala; Matteo Bonomi; Megi Ruka; Mentor Vrajolli; Merita Maksuti; Mervan Mirascija; Michael Reiffenstuel; Michael Roth; Michele Ribotta; Mimoza Kalia; Miodrag Milosavljevic; Mirela Muçaj; Mirjam de Koning; Mirjana Jovanovic; Mirko Popović; Mirsat Esati; Misha Popovikj; Montana Kadiu; Nataša Vučković; Natasha Mazari; Naum Lokoski; Nazim Rashidi; Nemanja Todorović Štiplija; Nenad Čelarević; Nenad Djurdjevic; Nevena Dimovska; Nevena Martinovic; Nevila Xhindi; Nikola Burazer; Nikola Dimitrov; Nola Ismajloska; Odeta Barbullushi; Olga Kvashuk; Orjana Çekrezi; Pande Eftimov; Petrica Dulgheru; Pjerina Gaxha; Pranvera Kastrati; Radica Koceva; Raimund Jehle; Ramadan Ilazi; Ranko Lazovic; Remzi Lani; Rezar Balla; Romana Vlahutin; Romina Kuko; Ruth Ferrero Turrión; Sabit Gashi; Sanja Damjanovic; Santa Argirova; Sihana Bejtullahu; Silvana Mojsovska; Simonida Kacarska; Skënder Durmishi;

Skënder Saqipi; Sofija Popović; Sonja Licht; Sonja Stojanovic Gajic; Sotiraq Guga; Srdjan Cvijic; Srdjan Majstorovic; Stefan Ristovski; Stela Sulioti; Suela Kalia; Tanja Boskovic; Tanja Mišćević; Taulant Balla; Tijana Cvjetićanin; Tina Bories; Tonin Gjuraj; Toshitsuki Kawauchi; Una Hajdari; Vahidije Kadiu; Valbona Zeneli; Valerie Covic; Valeska Esch; Verena Allert; Viktoria Voglsinger-Palm; Vlora Rechica; Visar Ymeri; Vladimir Vasic; Wouter Zweers; Xhelal Sveçla; Xhuliana Muçaj; Zdravko Ilic; Zeljko Jovanovic; Zoran Nechev.

# Annex 3

## List of participants in the consultations

#CSFTirana2023



# List of participants in the consultations

## Access to the single market

**Online consultations: June 23rd, June 27th and June 30th, 2023.**

**Participants:** Alban Hashani; Anamarija Velinovska; Ana Krstinovska; Ana Sofeska; Anja Quiring; Arberesha Loxha; Blagica Petreski; Branimir Jovanovic; Diona Grezda; Dmytro Naumenko; Dragana Djurica; Dragan Tevdovski; Dragan Tilev; Dušan Reljić; Edison Jakurti; Faruk Hadžić; Ioannis Armakolas; Jelica Minic; Liubov Akulenko; Lura Limani; Malinka Ristevska Jordanova; Maria Repko; Marija Mirchevska; Marko Sošić; Matteo Bonomi; Milena Mihajlovic (ex Lazarevic); Milica Uvalic; Mojmir Mrak; Naim Rashiti; Nenad Djurdjevic; Nikoleta Pavicevic; O Aleksandra Bulana; Ranka Miljenovic; Shqipe Jashari Sekiraqa; Silvana Mojsovska; Simonida Kacarska; Srdjan Majstorovic; Stefan Ristiovski; Stela Ademi; Tanja Boskovic; Tatjana Markovska; Tatjana Shterjova Dushkovska; Tilen Božič; Vancho Uzunov; Vladimir Medjak; Zlatko Veterovski; Zoran Nechev; Zsolt Darvas.

## Digitalization and connectivity

**Online consultations: May 10th and June 17th, 2023.**

**Participants:** Alban Hashani; Anamarija Velinovska; Ana Krstinovska; Ana Sofeska; Anja Quiring; Arberesha Loxha; Blagica Petreski; Branimir Jovanovic; Diona Grezda; Dmytro Naumenko; Dragana Djurica; Dragan Tevdovski; Dragan Tilev; Dušan Reljić; Edison Jakurti; Faruk Hadžić; Ioannis Armakolas; Jelica Minic; Liubov Akulenko; Lura Limani; Malinka Ristevska Jordanova; Maria Repko; Marija Mirchevska; Marko Sošić; Matteo Bonomi; Milena Mihajlovic (ex Lazarevic); Milica Uvalic; Mojmir Mrak; Naim Rashiti; Nenad Djurdjevic; Nikoleta Pavicevic; O Aleksandra Bulana; Ranka Miljenovic; Shqipe Jashari Sekiraqa; Silvana Mojsovska; Simonida Kacarska; Srdjan Majstorovic; Stefan Ristiovski; Stela Ademi; Tanja Boskovic; Tatjana Markovska; Tatjana Shterjova Dushkovska; Tilen Božič; Vancho Uzunov; Vladimir Medjak; Zlatko Veterovski; Zoran Nechev; Zsolt Darvas.

## Energy

**Online consultations: July 31st and September 28th, 2023.**

**Participants:** Aleksandra Sanjevic; Aleksandar Kovacevic; Aleksandra Tomanic; Boris Ilijevski; Damir Miljevic; Damjan Bogunovic; Denis Žiško; Dragan Minovski; Dusan Sabic; Elsa Benhöfer; Eoin Quill; Fijona Kurshumliu; Flamur Junuzi; Fjolla Qorri; Giulia Cretti; Hristina Vojvodic; Janez Kopač; Jelena Brkic; Jelena Ivančević; Jovan Rajić; Luan Shllaku; Luka Milovanović; Milos Milicevic; Mirko Popovic; Mirza Kušljugić; Nevena Smilevska; Pallavi Pant; Pippa Gallop; Silvana Gogo; Vasileios Karakasis; Verena Allert; Viktor Berishaj; Viktoria Voglsinger-Palm; Vladimir Djurdjevic.

## Politics of enlargement

**Consultations: June 28th, July 19th and September 12th, 2023.**

**Participants:** Adnan Cerimagic; Adnan Huskic; Adrijana Lavchiska; Alexandra Voudouri; Aleksandra Sanjevic; Alexandros Koutras; Ana Krstinovska; Bledar Feta; Christian Hagemann; Corina Stratulat; Dominic Maugeais; Donika Emini; Dusan Reljic; Eleftherios Petropoulos; Engjellushe Morina; Erwan Fouere; Fatmir Curri; Florent Marciacq; Gjergji Vurmo; Hedvig Morvai; Ioannis Armakolas; Isabelle Ioannides; Jana Juzova; Jelena Dzankic; Jovana Marovic; Lukas Macek; Marija Ristevska; Marta Szpala; Matteo Bonomi; Milan Nic; Oana Popescu; Pierre Mirel; Ruth Ferrero Turrion; Senada Selo Sabic; Simonida Kacarska; Srdjan Cvijic; Srdjan Majstorovic; Steven Blockmans; Tanja Miscevic; Vasileios P. Karakasis; Valeska Esch; Vessela Tcherneva; Ziga Faktor; Zoran Nechev.

## Security and geopolitics

**Online consultations: June 14th, June 23rd and June 30th, 2023.**

**Participants:** Adelina Hasani; Arjan Dyrmishi; Bledar Feta; Blerta Bejtullahu; Butrint Berisha; Drita Perezic; Engjellushe Morina; Igor Novakovic; Jamieson Weetman; Jeta Krasniqi; Jon Limaj; Jorida Shytaj; Lejdi Dervishi; Mark Baskin; Maja Piscevic; Mentor Vrajolli; Mehdi Sejdiu; Milica Kovačević; Misha Popovikj; Natasa Petrovic; Nermina Kuloglija-Zolj; Ramadan Ilazi; Saranda Stublla; Sonja Stojanovic Gajic; Stefan Vladislavljev.

## Mobility

**Online consultations: July 18th , July 26th , August 17th and August 24th, 2023.**

**Participants:** Adi Dodbiba; Amila Pilav-Velic; Ana Krstinovska; Aneta Cekikj; Antje Müller; Bernhard Fabianek; Birgit Ditzgens; Blerjana Bino; Cristina Mereutal; Dea Elmasllari; Dusan Sabic; Elke Dall; Elona Dhembo; Elona Xhaferri; Erida Curraj; Erinda Toska; Erjon Curraj; Gentian Elezi; Geron Kamberi; Gjergji Vurmo; Ilir Deda; Jelena Dzankic; Katarine Kreceva; Kejti Dhrami; Klodian Seferaj; Lirim Krasniqi; Lisa Cowey, Lucian Brujan; Lutjona Lula; Marija Mirchevska; Marija Vishinova Shemova; Monika Petrova; Nenad Čelarević; Nevila Xhindi; Nikelina Naska; Orkidea Xhaferaj; Ralf Hanatschek; Selma Šehović; Sinisa Marcic; Sladjana Benkovic; Stephanie Demart; Suzana Pecakovska; Vesna Borozan.

## Climate and Green agenda

**Online consultations: September 4th , September 5th and September 6th, 2023.**

**Participants:** Adi Tanovic; Adrijana Lavchiska; Alminda Mema; Almira Xhembulla; Aleksandar Bogoevski; Andrijana Ristovska Kostovska; Boris Erg; Denion Galimuna; Diana Boshkovska; Dragana Cherepnalkoska; Dusica Perisic; Eleftherious Petropoulos; Elena Dimitrieva; Elena Nikolovska; Emilija Atanasovska; Ermelinda Mahmutaj; Evgenija Serafimovska Kirkovski; Ersa Prifti; Fjolla Qorri; Friedrich Wulf; Genti Xhaxhiu; Gill Kitell; Ina Salhovic; Iva Bulajic; Iva Svilar; Ivana Vojinovic; Ivan Mucunski; Jadranka Ivanova; Jana Belcheva Andreevska; Jelena Djokic; Johannes Heidecker; Julija Brennauer; Kaja Shukova; Kiril Ristovski; Kristina Kuzevska; Lidija Aritonova Simonovska; Ljupka Siljanoska; Maja Zendelska; Marina Bulatovich; Mark Jorna; Mario Prendi; Marv Barbullushi; Mirjana Jovanovic; Mirsat Esati; Mirsat Shefovic; Mirjam de Koning; Natasha Danilovska; Nina Mihailovic; Ornela Cuci; Otto Graf; Petra Pop Ristova; Roberto Parizov; Sabina Lalaj; Sanja Ilich; Sanja Orlandich; Stanislava Dodeva; Stela Ademi; Tatjana Petkovska; Teodora Obradovic Grncarovska; Toni Popovski; Vanco Uzunov; Vesna Indova Tochko; Vlatko Trpeski; Verena Allert.

# Annex 4

## List of public events prior to CSF Final Event

#CSFTirana2023

June 15th, 2023, Sarajevo

Fixing the digital environment-  
how can the Balkans  
use the EU toolbox



June 20th, 2023, Tirana

2023 Tirana Civil Society  
and Think Tank Forum  
Launching Event



July 20th, 2023, Prishtina

Building Bridges for  
Enhancing Regional  
Security in the Western  
Balkan



July 24th , 2023, Kotor

## Western Balkans and Digital Policies



September 13th, 2023, Athens

## The EU-accession perspectives of the Western Balkans in light of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine



September 25th, 2023, Skopje

## Deeper economic integration of the Western Balkans to the European Union – when, how and how much?



September 26th, 2023, Skopje

## 2023 Civil Society and Think Tank Forum Event for Climate and Green Agenda



September 28h, 2023, Tirana

## Advancing Inclusive Regional Mobility and Catalysing Mobility – Driven Innovation and Knowledge Transfer in Western Balkans



October 6th, 2023, Belgrade

## Presentation of policy recommendations of the TWG Energy



# Annex 5

## List of advocacy meetings in Berlin, Brussels and Athens

#CSFTirana2023



# List of advocacy meetings in Berlin, Brussels and Athens

- **DG NEAR:** Michela Matuella, Acting Director for Western Balkans; Michael Voegelé, Deputy Head of Unit, WB Regional Programmes, Economic Investment Plan; Thomas Hagleitner, Head of Unit, WB Policy & Regional Strategy;
- **Commissioner for Enlargement:** Szabolcs Horváth, Cabinet expert; Ildikó Voller-Szenci, Member of Cabinet / Communication adviser;
- **European External Action Service:** Marko Makovec, Director at European External Action Service/Service of Deputy Secretary-General for political affairs; Jasna Jelusic, Head of Western Balkans Task Force, Strategic Communication and Information Analysis; Robert Huqi, Information and Communication Officer;
- **Italian Permanent Representative in Brussels:** Gabor de Zagon, Official for Western Balkans (COWEB), Enlargement Policy (COELA) and Adriatic Ionian strategy;
- **Spanish Permanent Representation in Brussels:** María García Benasach (Delegate of COELA) and Begoña Burgaleta (Deputy in COWEB);
- **European Economic and Social Committee, External Relation Unit:** David Hoić, Policy Officer - Western Balkans;
- **European Parliament:** Vladimír Bilcik, MP, Standing Rapporteur Serbia; Nikos Papandreou, MP;
- Working lunch co-hosted with the Albanian Ambassador Ms. Suela Janina: HE Mr. Danijel Apostolovic, DHOM and chargé d'affaires – Mission of the Republic of Serbia to EU; HE. Mr Petar Markovic; Ambassador – Mission of the Republic of Montenegro to EU; H.E. Mr. Obrad Kesić; Ambassador – Mission of Bosnia and Hercegovina to EU; HE. Mr. Agron Bajrami, Ambassador - Embassy of Republic of Kosovo to the Kingdom of Belgium; HE. Mr. Zulfi Ismaili, Ambassador - Permanent Mission of the Republic of North Macedonia at EU; Maja Kocijancic - Foreign Policy Advisor at the cabinet of President of European Council; Thomas Hagleitner – Head of Unit, Western Balkans Policy & Regional Strategy, DGNEAR; Djordje Bojovic (Accredited Parliamentary Assistant in Viola Von Cramon - Taubadel MEP Office); David Hoic; Policy Officer for Western Balkans at EESC;
- **Bruegel:** Zsolt Darvas, Senior Fellow, Alma Kurtovic, Partnerships and Project Manager;
- **European Policy Centre:** Corina Stratulat, Senior Policy Analyst and Head of Programme European Politics and Institution; Marta Mucznik, Policy Analyst;

- **Euractiv:** Sarantis Michalopoulos, Editorial Board, Goksen Caliskan;
- **Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies:** Tomi Huhtanen, Executive Director; Panos Tasiopoulos, Head of External Cooperation and Events;
- **Carnegie Europe:** Rosa Balfour, Director;
- **OSW Centre for Eastern Studies:** Marta Szpala, Senior Fellow;
- **ERSTE Stiftung:** Hedvig Morvai, Director, Strategy and Europe;
- **German Foreign Office:** Valeska Esch, Senior Advisor to the Federal Government Special Representative for the Countries of the Western Balkans;
- **German Federal Chancellery:** Alexander Wallau, Head of the Division of Bilateral Relations with the States of Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe and Jannis von Oy, Officer at the Federal Chancellery Bilateral relations with the States of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe;
- **German Bundestag:** Josip Juratovic, MP, Chairman of Bundestag's Parliamentary Friendship Group with South-East Europe; Boris Mijatovic, MP; Lorin Stan, MP Thomas Hackers advisor for the Western Balkans;
- **Aspen Institute:** Stormy-Annika Mildner, Executive Director; Tina Bories, Program Officer;
- **Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft:** Christian Hagemann, Executive Director; Viktoria Voglsinger-Palm, Deputy Executive Director;
- **European Council on Foreign Relations:** Anna Kuchenbecker, Senior Director for Strategic Partnerships; Panos Alexopoulos, Strategic Partnerships Manager; Engjellushe Morina, Senior Policy Fellow;
- **Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung:** Katja Giebel, Senior Programme Officer East and Southeast Europe Division International Department;
- **German Eastern Business Association:** Anja Quiring, Regional Director South East Europe Antje Müller, Programme Director;
- **DGAP:** Guntram Wolff, Director and CEO; Stefan Meister, Head of the Center for Order and Governance in Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia; Milan Nic, Senior research fellow in the Center for Order and Governance in Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia;
- **European Stability Initiative:** Gerald Knaus, Chairman;

- **Institut für Europäische Politik:** Katrin Böttger, Director, Dominic Maugeais, Research Advisor;
- **Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung:** Helene Kortländer, Head of Eastern European Department;
- **Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik:** Stefan Mair, Director;
- **Greek Government:** Thanos Dokos, National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of Greece;
- **Syriza:** Vangelis Kalpadakis, Diplomatic Advisor.

# Annex 6

## Chairs conclusions from the Berlin Summit in Tirana

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# CHAIR'S CONCLUSIONS

Nine years after the launching of Berlin Process in August 2014, the Heads of Government of Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, as well as the Heads of State or Government or representatives of Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovenia and the United Kingdom, Spain, Hungary, Romania and the Netherlands, the representatives of the European Union (EU), and of regional and international organizations and financial institutions met in person in Tirana on 16 October 2023 for the Summit Meeting of the Berlin Process.

The participants emphasized the importance of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans in the current context of geopolitical uncertainty and war on European soil. They highlighted the importance of strengthening connectivity, transport, trade, energy and digital ties in the Western Balkans as well as between the region and the EU.

Building on the Ministerial Meetings of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Interior and Economy, and Roma Integration Forum, as well as the Leaders' Dialogue on Climate Partnership, the Business Forum, Youth Forum, Civil Society Forum, the Digital Summit and the Joint Science Conference in the past few weeks, the participants took stock of the progress, ongoing challenges and prospects for regional cooperation in the Western Balkans as a stepping stone towards the gradual integration of the region in the EU policies, mechanisms and instruments.

The Western Balkans Six (WB6) welcomed the announcement of a Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, as outlined by the President of the European Commission in May 2023, and expressed their commitment to the advancement of the regional economic integration through the Common Regional Market through acceleration of domestic reforms, particularly in the area of the rule of law and fight against organized crime.

The WB6 participants expressed the need to bridge the socio-economic gap and enhance convergence between the Western Balkans and the European Union. To that end, they voiced their interest in stepping up cooperation among themselves and, where possible, with the EU on a number of policy areas, such as the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA), facilitating trade and transport, telecommunications and digitalization, climate, energy, agriculture, security, youth, education and science, and Roma integration.

The WB6 participants supported a structured periodic monitoring of the economic convergence of the Western Balkans towards the EU.

The WB6 participants expressed interest in exploring avenues of participation in meetings and fora with the EU, where issues of common interest are discussed.

## **Common Regional Market (CRM) and Improving Convergence between EU and Western Balkans**

The participants welcomed the signing of the Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Nurses, Veterinary Surgeons, Pharmacists and Midwives that will advance the mobility of professionals in the Western Balkans.

Further, the participants welcomed the entry into force of the three mobility agreements signed in Berlin in November 2022 for Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia and called for ratification/approval of these agreements by all of Western Balkans partners.

Building on the conclusions of the Ministerial Meeting of Ministers of Economy, participants recognized the importance of the European Union's Single Euro Payment Area (SEPA), which is tasked to effectively bring domestic and cross-border payments within the SEPA to the same level of cost, time efficiency and safety. They underlined the importance of reducing the costs of cross-border payments, also through setting up instant payment systems, facilitating supply of services of non-bank payment providers, further development of the FinTech industry in the region, enabling the use of QR code-initiated payments and of adopting a framework to limit the cost of intra-CEFTA payments at the benefit of consumers and businesses.

The participants warmly welcomed the entry into force of the reduced data roaming charges between the EU and the Western Balkans as of 1 October, based on the Roaming Declaration, facilitated by the Regional Cooperation Council with the strong support of European Commission, that was signed between the 38 Western Balkans and EU operators at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tirana, in December 2022.

The participants commended the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the Central European Free Trade Agreement Secretariat (CEFTA) for their support in the implementation of policy agendas under the Common Regional Market and their coordinating role in the negotiation of the CRM mobility agreements, thus contributing to higher economic convergence between the EU and the Western Balkans.

The participants noted that further significant progress should be made with regard to the implementation of the Common Regional Market Action Plan by the time of the next Berlin Process Summit Meeting and called upon RCC, CEFTA and other regional organization to start devising the next phase.

## **Youth, Education and Research**

The Western Balkans Six participants expressed their wish on the advancement of gradual integration of the Western Balkans education, science and youth institutions and policies into related EU areas and mechanisms

The participants commended the signing of the Agreement between the College of Europe, the Ministry of Education and Sports of the Republic of Albania and the Municipality of Tirana on 6 October 2023, which paves the way to the opening of the College of Europe campus in Tirana. The participants stressed the importance of this institution to prepare professionals and experts on EU affairs across the entire region, as well as to foster a sense of mutual understanding and belonging. They also praised the European Commission's swift support of the project.

The participants welcomed the recommendations of the Joint Science Conference held in Tirana, between 18 and 20 September 2023, regarding the need to boost investments in research and innovation, as well as to establish Research and Technology Excellence Hubs and Universities of Excellence in the Western Balkans, as well as regional research funds. These actions should contribute to a stronger integration of the Western Balkans into the European Research Area and the European Education Area. They welcomed the recommendation to renew and expand the Widening call for the Western Balkans in Horizon Europe. They also commended the regional transnational cooperation and mobility in higher education, research, and innovation.

The participants welcomed the Conclusions of the Western Balkans Youth Forum held in Albania on 6 October 2023. Building on these Conclusions, the participants underlined the importance of strengthening and expanding current regional mechanisms and EU schemes to further benefit youth mobility and cultural exchanges in the Western Balkans, as a way to promote inclusive peacebuilding and reconciliation in the region. They also commended the Forum's emphasis on including compulsory green education in formal curricula, as well as on the participation of young people in civic activities and the public sphere.

## **Including Western Balkans in the EU Value Chain Partnership**

The participants acknowledged that with the current geopolitical situation, a Value Chain Partnership between the EU and the Western Balkans should be explored. They acknowledged the strategic importance of the Western Balkans region in the context of Critical Raw Materials and batteries, and its role in the EU Value Chain and industries. With the increasing global demand for these materials, the Western Balkans hold a significant potential that must be harnessed effectively to contribute to the EU's security of supply.

Participants underlined that investments in research, innovation, and sustainable mining practices should be prioritized, with an aim to increase the region's contribution to the EU's Critical Raw Materials and industry value chain. Such an increase would not only enhance the EU's security of supply but also promote economic growth and job creation in the Western Balkans.

The participants highlighted the importance of adopting a sustainable and inclusive approach in harnessing the potential of the Western Balkans in the common raw materials and EU Value Chain that takes into account environmental and social considerations.

The WB6 participants stated their interest to become part of the EU Value Chain Partners Club for Critical Raw Materials and get support for the development of relevant industries, aligned with the needs and standards of the EU Single Market.

## **Trade, Transport and Digital Connectivity**

The Western Balkans Six participants stressed the importance of boosting investment in transport and railway connectivity in the Western Balkans and between the Western Balkans and the EU.

The participants confirmed that regional economic cooperation and enhanced economic relations with the EU go hand in hand with better connectivity between the region and the EU.

Participants expressed full support for the Joint Transport Community-CEFTA Declaration on ‘Taking forward the Green Lanes’ issued at the Connectivity Summit in Budva on 15 and 16 May, and the follow-up work on the Roadmap for Green Lanes and coordinated controls at the EU-WB6 border crossing points. They underlined the importance of furthering customs cooperation between the region and European Union. In that regard, they stated their support for the extension of the second phase of the Trade and Transport Facilitation Project with interventions that are aimed at improving connectivity in the Western Balkans and between the region and the EU.

The Western Balkans participants stressed the need to accelerate the implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan and extend CEFTA-TCT Green Lanes to all main border crossing points with the EU Member States, as well as to improve the infrastructure conditions and operations on those border crossing points. In the same spirit, they called for full implementation of the Green Lanes with the EU and the electronic exchange of pre-arrival data in both directions, followed by the establishment of an adequate legal base.

The WB6 participants stated that in addition to stepping up investments in the transport infrastructure, it is important to ensure a) careful prioritization of investments, informed by current and future traffic flows, b) closer coordination among the Western Balkans and EU Member States bordering on the region; and c) strategic mobilization of funding resources including lending, grant financing and private investment. The participants commended the inclusion of the Corridor VIII railway section from Skopje to Durres in the extended TEN-T Core Network. They called upon the EU and international financial institutions (IFIs) to invest in this project of strategic importance, both from an economic and a security perspective.

The WB6 participants asked for enhanced trade facilitation efforts on the part of the European Commission and CEFTA. This includes efforts to reduce long waiting times at key border/common crossing points with the EU Member States, time and cost spent on import and export processes, uncertainty about transit times undermining competitiveness of exports, and difficulties for Western Balkans companies to demonstrate the quality of their products and compliance with EU standards.



The participants welcomed the signing of association agreements between the European Commission and the EU candidate countries on the Digital Europe Program in June 2023. They highlighted the importance of improving digital and broadband connectivity infrastructure, as well as legal and regulatory framework between the EU and the Western Balkans in the digital area, including cybersecurity.

The Western Balkans Six participants emphasized the need for increased investments in interconnectivity and infrastructure, and capacity building in relation to the acquis implementation concerning the environment, transport and energy sectors. The participants appreciated the work done by RCC in facilitating and coordinating regional activities related to the spread of new technologies and recognized progress made so far in these areas.

## **Implementing the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans**

Participants welcomed the outcomes of the Leaders' Dialogue in June 2023 and the establishment of the Regional Climate Partnership between the WB6 and Germany, with the objective to jointly accelerate the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. Accordingly, the Leaders of the Western Balkans Six and of the Federal Republic of Germany endorsed the Joint Declaration of Intent on the Regional Climate Partnership. They stated therein the intention to advance their climate-related strategic dialogue and expand cooperation for a socially just and green transition in areas such as energy, with a focus on energy efficiency and renewables, sustainable urban development, tourism, transport, agriculture. They stressed the relevance of boosting private sector investments in these areas. They welcomed the commitment of the Federal Republic of Germany to support this transition with an initial package of Euro 1 billion, including grants and development loans until 2030 through the KfW Development Bank, as well as the additionally pledged budgetary support of Euro 500 million through promotional loans in the short term.

Following the last year's Declaration on energy security and green transition in the Western Balkans, the Western Balkans participants, reinforced their strong commitment to the common green transition objectives underpinned by the Energy Community Decarbonisation Road Map, in the context of the Green Agenda for Western Balkans.

They also welcomed the increased support of the French Development Agency (AFD), which has engaged EUR 1 billion in the Western Balkans since 2019 in support of efforts in a wide range of key sectors for the European integration of the region, namely energy and ecological transition, urban development, transport and economic inclusion.

The Western Balkans participants highlighted the importance of aligning legislation with EU in the energy sector, with a view of enabling full market integration, decarbonization, acceleration of the uptake of renewables and reducing greenhouse gas emissions that is compliant with the EU energy sector acquis under the Energy Community Treaty.

The participants agreed on the need for enhanced cooperation in the areas of agriculture, food, rural development and forestry to effectively address sustainability and food security challenges.

The participants acknowledged the substantial efforts of the Standing Working Group for Regional Rural Development (SWG).

In that regard, it was emphasized that the ongoing policy coordination in climate change adaptation, soil protection, organic farming, agricultural knowledge, and innovation systems (AKIS), wine regulation and forestry need to be reinforced. In addition, other aspects of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans should be addressed, such as the alignment with EU standards on food safety, plant health and animal welfare, environment, enhanced sanitary controls and traceability, as well as fostering renewable energy production in rural areas. Participants acknowledged and appreciated the role of Germany and other EU Member States, including France, to help toward that aim and called on the EU and other international development organizations to support these efforts.

Further, participants commended the work and role of the Regional Cooperation Council in coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and reiterated the necessity to coordinate support for all partners, including local governments, to achieve the commitments of Sofia Declaration and align with EU standards and practices. Participants have agreed to take action, increase regional cooperation, and enhance the regulatory framework to prevent plastic pollution, including marine pollution.

## **Security**

The participants stressed the importance of deeper regional cooperation in policy areas related to security.

They also reiterated the critical need for a higher level of information sharing between the Western Balkans and the EU Joint Task Forces, and for joint exercises to tackle specific aspects of organized crime, such as human trafficking, migrantsmuggling, and drugstrafficking as the way forward.

The participants stressed that building stronger cooperation in the area of cybersecurity is critical, including coordinated operational and technical support, and setting a platform to enable early warnings of cyber threats and share practices and experience.

On this note, the participants welcomed the signature of the tripartite intergovernmental agreement establishing the Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre and recognized its potential to promote regional cooperation in the domain of cyber resilience.

The Western Balkans Six participants expressed their desire to see stepped up effortstowards the integrated border management (IBM) and asked for support in relation to capacity building, digitalization and border security,

as well as for better communication and coordination with EU law enforcement agencies, including the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), the EU Cybersecurity Emergency Incident Review Mechanisms, etc. They called for an ongoing high-level dialogue on cybersecurity and closer coordination at a regional level, as facilitated by the Regional Cooperation Council.

## **Bilateral Issues and Good Neighbourly Relations**

Participants expressed concern over the recent rise of tensions between Serbia and Kosovo leading to and in the aftermath of the attack on Kosovo police and the killing of a Kosovo police sergeant and the wounding of three others, on 24 September. They stressed that the recent developments threaten peace, security, and cooperation in the region, and they push back the reconciliation efforts of the EU, and other strategic partners, in the Western Balkans.

Participants encouraged European efforts to engage with the parties, with the aim to unblock the EU-facilitated normalization dialogue and, by doing so, unblock regional cooperation and respective EU paths of the WB6. In this spirit, participants underlined the need for joint European efforts and tailor-made mechanisms for economic development, youth, and education, as well as for people-to-people contacts and inter-group civil society cooperation.

The participants voiced concern that bilateral issues among Berlin Process participants may continue to obstruct respective EU paths in the region. The Western Balkans Six participants asked for the continuous support of EU and the EU participating States for the efforts of the Western Balkans in the area of strengthening rule of law, fight against organized crime and in their EU accession paths.

The participants reaffirmed the importance of regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations for the region's EU prospects. The Western Balkans participants proposed that a robust conditionality regarding implementation of regional commitments and good neighbourly relations in the Western Balkans be included in the Growth Plan implementing criteria.

## **Roma Integration**

The participants appreciated progress on the implementation of the Poznan Declaration of Western Balkans partners on Roma integration within the enlargement process. The leaders of the WB6 welcomed and formally adopted the conclusions of the Fourth Roma Ministerial held in Skopje, on 22 September. These conclusions clearly identify the intermediate steps needed to implement the commitments on Roma integration in the fields of education, employment, the regularization of informal settlements, in the digital field and on civil registration.

## **Future of Berlin Process**

Participants welcomed Germany's willingness to host the next Leaders' Summit in 2024, on the 10th anniversary of the Berlin Process

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