
International Conference

New Wind in Europe's Western Balkan Policy?

Shaping the Meantime to Accession by Regional Initiatives

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Overview

The Western Balkans' path to EU membership has reemerged as one of, if not the most consequential of the challenges on the European agenda. Since the promise of opening accession talks with the six Western Balkan countries (WB6) in Thessaloniki in 2003, the enlargement process has revealed structural indecision within the EU, reflective of ongoing debates about its capacity and willingness to integrate new members, shifting geopolitical realities, and waning political commitment to maintaining the credibility of the enlargement process. These challenges are further aggravated by the Western Balkans' internal struggles, including economic stagnation, political instability and gridlock, and democratic backsliding, which have stalled progress toward meaningful reforms and closer integration.

The war in Ukraine has reshaped the broader context of EU enlargement. The so-called "Zeitenwende" – with its potential to transform EU policies and renew its commitment to the region – has injected a greater sense of urgency into the enlargement process. Once again, the region exemplifies the EU's struggle to reconcile its ambitions with political realities, the tension between the Union's identity as a community of shared values and its geopolitical priorities.

To confront these challenges, the EU has introduced several initiatives that complement the formal enlargement process, such as the Berlin Process, the Green Agenda, and the EU Growth Plan. These efforts aim to foster sustainable development, enhance regional cooperation, and address the impacts of various crises. By targeting critical issues such as climate change and environmental degradation, these initiatives

seek to align the Western Balkans more closely with the EU, particularly in light of stagnation within the official accession process. However, the success of these measures hinges on the EU's ability to maintain a consistent and strategic approach to enlargement while effectively supporting the Western Balkans in overcoming their structural obstacles. This dynamic highlights the need for renewed dialogue and actionable strategies to advance the region's integration into the EU. By bringing together policymakers, experts, and stakeholders, these efforts can offer deeper insights into the complex forces shaping the Western Balkans' development and help craft a clearer vision for the future.

Amid an increasingly dynamic global landscape, the EU must reaffirm its core ability to integrate diverse cultures, nations, and values in times of growing uncertainty. Against this background, the Western Balkans' journey towards EU membership is not only about enlargement – it is about manifesting the Union's identity, purpose, and role.

Day 1 / Intro Talk 1: What are the Most Crucial Trends Shaping the WB6 – Today and Tomorrow?

In her opening talk, *Simonida Kacarska*, Director of the European Policy Institute (EPI) in Skopje, highlighted the Western Balkans' ongoing struggles with stalled EU integration, which has led to growing disillusionment and what she called a "moral loss" among local populations. She outlined key challenges, including unresolved bilateral disputes, democratic backsliding, youth emigration, and transactional tendencies within the EU that undermine trust and credibility. Kacarska stressed the importance of clear goals, innovative EU policies, and

regional incentives to address these systemic issues and restore confidence in the EU accession process. Under the current conditions, doubts were raised about the region's ability to transition from being policy takers to becoming genuine policy-shapers within the European framework. This concern not only set the tone for the conference but highlighted the broader challenges the Western Balkans still face as they again find themselves at a critical juncture in their European aspirations.

Panel Discussion: The European Union and the WB6 – Between Geopolitical Necessities, Bilateral Disputes, and Democratic Backsliding

The discussion, moderated by *Michael Martens* (FAZ), featured *Eric Nelson* (former U.S. Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina), *Viola von Cramon* (former Member of the European Parliament and Western Balkans expert), *Niels von Redecker* (German Federal Foreign Office), and *Valbona Zeneli* (Atlantic Council). The panel addressed the EU's enlargement towards the Western Balkans against the background of the increased geopolitical urgency following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Panelists questioned whether EU enlargement is truly desired, given internal EU divisions and the challenges of integrating new veto-wielding countries. Discussions also focused on the importance of Serbia's lithium reserves within Europe's de-risking policies as well as frustrations with missed opportunities to exert pressure on Serbia's leadership. Bilateral disputes, such as Bulgaria's veto of North Macedonia's accession and the stalled Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, were also seen as major obstacles. Concerns about democratic backsliding and ongoing emigration were raised, while some panelists suggested a "staged accession" model with limited powers, or reforms to the Council's voting rules as potential ways to move the process forward. However, such solutions are unlikely to be realised, as implementing them would require a treaty change. Despite the in-depth discussion, finding concrete solutions proved challenging, and the session concluded with *Martens'* candid remark: "We are still confused, but on a higher level."

Literary Evening

The first day of the conference ended with a cultural contribution, a book presentation by *Vedran Džihic* from his book "Ankommen" (Arriving), moderated by *Adelheid Feilcke* (Deutsche Welle). The book narrates Džihic's personal story of his youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s, then becoming a refugee in Austria, and his eventual arrival in Vienna. In his work, he not only recounts the experiences of a displaced person but also delves into the social and political challenges of settling into a new society. In "Ankommen", Džihic discusses pivotal key moments of his life, which he refers to as "anchor moments". In the intimate setting of this reading, he shared some of these moments with the audience while answering personal questions. In addition, he contextualized his experiences within a broader socio-political framework by addressing the societal super-diversity in Austria and Germany and pleading not only for its acknowledgement, but also for giving diverse communities more space to voice and organize themselves. During the reading and its plenary exchange, the ultimate conclusion was that the oxymoron of radical empathy is needed for social cohesion and that friendship and solidarity are the fundamental resources that create a strong and united "we".

Day 2 / Challenges in the WB6 (Part 1): Creating Economic Growth – A Perspective on Youth, Gender, and Emigration

The panel was moderated by *Anja Quiring* (German Eastern Business Association). The panelists *Christoph Beeck* (ProCredit Bank), *Umur Gökçe* (OECD Paris), and *Dragan Stanojević* (University of Belgrade) discussed several key trends highlighted by the FES Southeastern Europe Youth Study 2024/'25 and the OECD's Western Balkan Competitiveness Outlook. The statistics show that while youth unemployment is declining, it remains high, with many young people working below their qualifications. The panel emphasized the importance of better aligning the skills of young people with labor market demands, as skills mismatches and underdeveloped labor market intelligence systems hinder growth. Despite these challenges, the outlook for the region remains positive, with an increasing attraction for foreign workers and

policy recommendations focused on improving labor market participation. Overall, the discussion stressed the importance of skill matching, stronger institutions, and policy reforms to address labor market challenges and attract foreign workers.

Challenges in the WB6 (Part 2): Climate Change and Sustainable Economic Development

This panel explored the Western Balkans' significant exposure to climate change and its consequences for public health, energy systems, and sustainable development. Moderated by *Hansjörg Brey* (Southeast Europe Association, Munich), the discussion highlighted the region's reliance on outdated energy infrastructure and coal, leading to severe air pollution, health issues, and high intensity emissions. The panelists *Verena Allert* (Germanwatch), *Vladimir Đurđević* (University of Belgrade) and *Aleksandra Tomanić* (European Fund for the Balkans) emphasised the region's status as a climate hotspot, as it is already experiencing the devastating effects of global warming, including heatwaves, droughts, floods, and heat-related deaths. The region's infrastructure is unprepared for the growing intensity of climate extremes, making urgent modernization essential. A key theme was the need for transition to renewable energy, with examples like Albania's reliance on hydropower showing potential for cleaner energy systems. However, coal continues to dominate in many countries, hindering progress. The panelists advocated for aligning the Western Balkans' energy policies with the Paris Agreement and the EU Green Agenda, emphasizing the importance of decentralized energy production to reduce reliance on geopolitical powers and fossil fuels. They concluded that while challenges are immense, the region has opportunities to become a leader in renewables if investments, institutional reforms, and regional cooperation are prioritized.

Intro Talk 2: Mapping of the EU Policy Landscape in the WB6 – What is New, What is Specific, Where Are There Overlaps?

The second keynote by *Adnan Čerminagić* (European Stability Initiative) took stock of the current enlargement process by first untangling the existing "jungle of initiatives" that flourished since Thessaloniki in 2003. He outlined

three key elements of the enlargement process. *First*, there must be a credible promise that every country can reach membership within a reasonable timeframe. *Second*, the process is defined by chapters on creating and adapting legislation, jurisprudence, and institutions in line with EU law, which needs to be assured. *Third*, substantial financial support is essential to sustain this gradual transformation until completion. While initial expectations were inspired by the previous accession process, culminating in the 2004 Eastern enlargement, the process for the Western Balkans appears to be fundamentally different. To address the shortcomings of the enlargement process, various regional and bilateral approaches have been introduced, such as the Berlin Process launched in 2014. While their rationales remain generally positive, this created a jungle of initiatives that in turn became subversive of the enlargement process itself.

Focusing resources on small-scale issues too often creates no significant or not enough spillover effects regarding the completion of the official criteria and chapters, even though they remain the crucial next step towards membership. In a lively discussion moderated by *Christian Hagemann* (Southeast Europe Association), participants debated how to navigate this complex landscape. They highlighted the need for streamlining initiatives to focus on small-scale, high-impact projects that directly contribute to EU accession goals.

Idea Workshops: Regional Policy Initiatives – The Go-To for Shaping the Meantime until EU Accession?

The afternoon of the conference's second day featured one of its central events: idea workshops. In these sessions, experts were divided into groups to analyze the functionality and impact of three key EU initiatives – the Berlin Process, the Green Agenda, and the Growth Plan – to address the challenges confronting EU accession of the different WB6 countries. Through collaborative discussions, participants assessed the effectiveness of these initiatives in fostering regional cooperation, sustainable development, and economic growth as well as their hurdles in successful implementation. The workshops also served as a platform to develop actionable

low-threshold ideas to be integrated into policy recommendations following the conference.

Workshop 1: The Berlin Process

Discussants emphasized that this initiative has significant advantages in allowing for more flexible and direct communication on regional issues and needs. The Berlin Process (BP) facilitates engagement between WB6 leaders, participating EU Member States, and the European Commission to discuss priorities and policies in line with the EU *acquis*. However, workshop discussants emphasized that the Berlin Process lacks institutional memory and that there is no proper mechanism to systematically follow up over time on the initiatives signed during the summits. Monitoring and evaluation of implemented projects remains one of the main functional weaknesses, workshop participants underlined. The rotating chairmanship and frequent changes at EU or international levels in the priorities addressed in the Berlin Process declarations could lead to over-ambitious and therefore unsuccessful initiatives. As an example, workshop participants pointed to the energy and environmental initiatives that have emerged from the Berlin Process, with their demanding requirements for national policy changes, major investments, and changes in attitudes.

The workshop participants therefore proposed a small but permanent secretariat for the BP, which would give it the institutional memory it lacks and act as a monitoring mechanism for projects and their outcomes. This secretariat could also help to improve the policy recommendation process of the BP. Fewer and more concrete recommendations would simplify implementation and make it easier for WB6 governments to follow up. The provision of systematic and coherent information could stimulate new proposals from the BP that could better fit into the EU financial framework for the WB6, workshop participants underlined. In addition, this structure could work towards ensuring active and regular participation of the European Commission in all Berlin Process events, as this was seen by workshop participants as a must for successful long-term cooperation. However, there was no consensus on the actual format and structure of such a permanent secretariat. While some suggested that the

proposed small and permanent secretariat should be located within the German Foreign Ministry – given that Germany was the initiator of the BP – others argued for ownership and therefore suggested that such a structure should be located within the WB6 region. Still others were more generally critical of the secretariat proposal, stressing that such a structure would sacrifice the highly valued flexibility of the BP – an aspect lacking in many multi-lateral initiatives.

Another element of the Berlin Process discussed in this Idea Workshop was its inclusiveness and, in particular, broadening the involvement of other stakeholders. In addition to civil society actors already involved in this regional initiative, workshop participants highlighted the opportunity for greater academic cooperation, which could not only bridge a gap between states and societies within the region but also contribute to a shared understanding and narrative of the past, which is currently lacking. Another avenue for greater inclusiveness would be youth exchange programs and specialized youth formats. Such efforts could build on existing structures at different levels – such as the twinning initiatives, Erasmus, and the Erasmus EU Youth Ambassador formats. In the context of increasing inclusiveness, the aspect of ownership was again highlighted by the workshop participants. From the perspective of civil society and participating states from the region, it is often not clear whether the process is a shared endeavor with equal access and rights, or rather a top-down approach initiated by some stakeholders.

Workshop 2: The Green Agenda and the Economic and Investment Plan

Participants underlined that the Green Agenda and the Economic and Investment Plan require a more streamlined funding framework, as current overlaps create ambiguity in resource allocation. Transparency should be improved by implementing traceability mechanisms similar to the EU's (pre-accession) IPA funds. Additionally, they underlined that greater clarity is needed in project preparation, development, and progress tracking.

In the discussion, it was also underlined that the limited involvement of local actors remains

a key challenge. Access to funding should be facilitated for small and medium-sized entities by channeling grants through commercial banks and municipalities. Energy poverty, currently insufficiently addressed in the Green Agenda, should become a dedicated action area with targeted funding and collaboration with social care centers. Furthermore, fair competition in the energy sector needs to be ensured by reducing the dominance of public utilities and developing a regulatory framework that fosters private sector investment.

In the broader context of EU enlargement, participants stressed that the transition of coal regions should follow a holistic approach, by including pre-accession countries in the Just Transition Fund to build capacity for future EU funding. Regional initiatives should focus on leveraging existing infrastructure to enhance cross-border energy grid integration, thereby strengthening public services.

Ultimately, the discussants underlined that a major shortcoming of the EU has been the ineffective communication of the Green Agenda and the Economic and Investment Plan in the WB6. Improved public engagement is essential to raise environmental awareness and underscore alignment with the European Green Deal, reinforcing the region's path towards EU accession. While civil society organizations have helped to fill the gap, the EU must take urgent steps to ensure transparency and combat misinformation.

Workshop 3: The New Growth Plan

The New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, launched by the European Commission in 2023, will run until 2027. Its main objective is to boost economic growth and improve the region's integration into the EU's internal market. Reforms to meet the objectives of the New Growth Plan are currently underway in the WB6 countries, and the first tranche of financial assistance will be disbursed by the end of 2024. While the New Growth Plan will not substantially address the region's most fundamental problems – such as a lack of trust, high state involvement in the economy, or widespread corruption – due to its limited financial resources, the workshop discussants highlighted that this initiative could still have a positive impact on the WB6 by

providing financial incentives for reform. To further increase the impact of the New Growth Plan, experts at the conference suggested improving the transparency of the resources provided and establishing a robust monitoring mechanism – including more oversight by civil society organizations. Allowing for more conditionality and a merit-based approach was another aspect suggested. The New Growth Plan should integrate the enlargement policy with the approach to improve EU competitiveness, as outlined in the Draghi report on EU competitiveness (2024). Moreover, the discussants stressed that participation in the European Cohesion Fund is a potential low-hanging fruit to be plucked before full EU membership. The New Growth Plan should systematically prepare for this intermediate step on the longer road to European integration.

Day 3 / Concluding Panel: What's Next for EU's Policy towards the WB6?

The final panel addressed critical questions about the EU's enlargement policy. Panelists *Albert Hani* (Regional Youth Cooperation Council, RYCO), *David McAllister* (MEP, Committee on Foreign Affairs), and *Manuel Sarrazin* (German Federal Government Special Representative for the Countries of the Western Balkans) emphasized the urgency of integrating the WB6 amidst ongoing Russian aggression and its impact on European security. The discussion highlighted frustrations over enlargement fatigue and missed opportunities, such as North Macedonia's stalled accession. Skepticism about the process persists due to the lack of clear timelines and readiness challenges on both sides. The panelists proposed gradual integration as a potential solution, allowing the WB6 countries to participate in EU structures, while full membership would remain a long-term goal. They emphasized the importance of improving public diplomacy to rebuild trust and credibility, noting that enlargement is a two-way road requiring reforms in both the EU and the WB6. By addressing these challenges and fostering actionable solutions, the conference underscored the importance of revitalizing the EU's Western Balkan policy to ensure stability, prosperity, and closer integration in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

Conclusion

Can we truly speak of renewed momentum in Europe's Western Balkan policy when this conference highlighted the EU's persistent internal contradictions regarding enlargement and the region's ongoing struggles to advance? Economic stagnation, political instability, democratic backsliding, and the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation remain critical challenges for the Western Balkans. The conference explored EU strategies, such as the Berlin Process, the Green Agenda, and the EU Growth Plan, as potential pathways to address these pressing issues.

In addition to these often structural and long-term solutions, numerous low-hanging fruits could be leveraged to make tangible progress within the enlargement chapters. By streamlining existing resources and focusing on achievable, targeted actions, the EU and the Western Balkans can build momentum toward integra-

tion and demonstrate the viability of the enlargement process in the short term.

In sum, discussions revealed that the region's integration remains stalled due to unresolved disputes, growing disillusionment with the EU, and democratic setbacks. A key takeaway was the urgent need to streamline EU initiatives, prioritizing high-impact projects that directly advance EU accession goals. Given the prevailing enlargement fatigue and skepticism, the EU must rebuild trust by focusing on public diplomacy and demonstrating a clear and tangible commitment to the region's future within the Union. It remains uncertain whether geopolitical pressures alone will drive meaningful change in the EU's approach. What is clear, however, is that progress in the enlargement process and the strengthening of Europe's unity will require a careful balancing of political realities – not only within the Western Balkans but also within the EU itself.