

BEYOND THE ACCESSION PROCESS: Mapping the EU's initiatives in the Western Balkans

Executive summary

- This paper offers an overview of the European Union's initiatives in the Western Balkans beyond the formal enlargement policy, and in particular, accession negotiations. Its aim is to shed light on the multifaceted relationship between the EU and the region. While it is not an exhaustive mapping of every EU instrument or policy, and while many could arguably be seen also as integral part of the accession process and enlargement policy, this paper provides insight into the diverse and dynamic ways in which the EU engages with the Western Balkans.
- The Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) provides the legal and institutional framework for aligning the region's countries with EU standards. It serves as a first step towards membership. Similarly, sectoral cooperation through initiatives like the Energy Community and Transport Community aim at fostering integration in critical areas such as energy markets. These initiatives aim to partially integrate the Western Balkans into the EU's single market, allowing the region to benefit from cooperation with the EU while preparing for full membership.
- The Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) and the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) aim to further reinforce the EU's overall policy towards the region by providing avenues for financial support for key infrastructure, energy, and social projects. These initiatives pool resources from the EU, international financial institutions, and bilateral donors to address some of the region's developmental needs. Projects financed under these frameworks help modernise infrastructure, improve energy efficiency, and promote green growth.
- Environmental sustainability is a more recent area of EU engagement in the Western Balkans, as seen through the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. This initiative aims to align the region with the EU's environmental policies and goals, particularly the European Green Deal, addressing issues like decarbonisation, renewable energy, and biodiversity conservation.

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Beyond the Accession Process – Mapping the EU's initiatives in the Western Balkans

- The New Growth Plan, introduced in 2023, represents an attempt to deepen the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans. By providing additional funding and facilitating further access to the EU's single market. This plan aims to incentivise more comprehensive reforms in governance, economic policy, and institutional capacity. It ties access to funds to the success of reforms, including the rule of law reforms.
- The EU also offers the Western Balkans an opportunity to participate in EU programmes, such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, and Creative Europe. These programmes not only provide access to additional EU funding but also foster cross-border cooperation.
- EU member states have also played a role in pushing for regional cooperation through initiatives like the Berlin Process and the Brdo-Brijuni Process. These initiatives have aimed to strengthen political dialogue, foster regional cooperation, and promote reconciliation. The Berlin Process, in particular, has achieved some milestones, such as the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) and the Transport Community. But it has also pushed forward the Common Regional Market (CRM), which aims to harmonise regulations and remove some barriers to trade and investment within the region.

Introduction: The EU accession process and beyond

The success of the EU enlargement policy rests on three key elements: first, a credible promise of membership within a reasonable timeframe; second, comprehensive accession negotiations where candidate countries align their legal frameworks with EU standards; and third, significant financial and technical assistance to support necessary reforms and convergence.

Alongside the enlargement policy, since the early 2000s the EU has developed and implemented various initiatives aimed at improving its relations with Western Balkan countries. These initiatives have often provided early access to certain benefits of full EU membership. Notable examples include partial integration into the energy and transport markets. Additionally, the EU has enabled the Western Balkans to participate in various EU programmes, such as Erasmus+, Creative Europe, or the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. At times, the EU has introduced region-specific versions of new EU-wide initiatives, such as the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, modelled on the European Green Deal.

The rationale behind these initiatives has been twofold. First, the EU aimed to deliver tangible benefits to the region before full membership. Second, the EU sought to generate a spill-over effect that would encourage candidate countries to intensify their efforts in advancing through the accession process. However, as the credibility of the EU's membership promise has waned, the EU has increasingly launched new initiatives, often as an instrument to maintain or restore its influence in the region. A prime example is the Berlin Process, initiated by Germany in 2014 as a response to the European Commission President's announcement that no new members would join the EU before 2019.

This paper maps the key ongoing EU initiatives in the Western Balkans, examining their objectives, financial frameworks, implementation progress, areas of overlap, and their overall contribution to the EU accession process.

The Stabilisation and Association Process: Laying the Groundwork for EU Integration

The Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) was launched by the European Union in 1999 as the cornerstone of its policy towards the Western Balkans. It was modelled on Europe Agreements and signed with the countries which joined the EU in 2004. The aim of the SAP was to promote peace, stability, and economic development in the region while preparing the countries for eventual EU membership. The process involved the negotiation and implementation of Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs), which serve as formal frameworks for cooperation and alignment with EU standards.

What is the Stabilisation and Association Process about? The SAP is a comprehensive legal, economic and political framework designed to guide the Western Balkan countries towards closer economic integration with the EU. It focuses on political dialogue, economic cooperation, and the alignment of legislation with EU standards. Through SAAs, the Western Balkan countries commit to reforms in areas such as democracy, rule of law, human rights, market economy, and regional cooperation, all essential for their path to EU membership. The EU holds regular bilateral meetings at political and technical level with individual countries where implementation is discussed.

Who is involved? The SAP applies to all six Western Balkan countries but each country has negotiated its own Stabilisation and Association Agreement, setting out the terms of cooperation and the specific reforms required for each country. Its trade related aspects came into force with North Macedonia in 2001, with Albania in 2006, with Montenegro in 2008, with Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2008, with Serbia in 2010, and with Kosovo in 2016.

What has been achieved since its launch? The SAP has played a crucial role in increasing the trade between Western Balkans countries and the EU. In 2009, for ex-

ample, the total trade (imports and exports) between the Western Balkans and the EU was around €28 billion. By 2019, this figure has almost doubled to around €54 billion. The implementation of SAAs has arguably also contributed to progress in political and economic reforms. The agreements have also helped push Western Balkan countries to align their legal frameworks with EU standards, particularly in areas like competition policy.

How is it funded? The SAP does not have specific funding but its goals are supported by various EU financial instruments, primarily the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA). This funding is designed to help the Western Balkan countries implement the necessary reforms, strengthen their institutions, and develop infrastructure to meet EU standards (goals shared with the SAP). The EU also provides technical assistance and advisory support to ensure effective implementation of the agreements.

What are the challenges? Despite the progress, the SAP faces challenges related to slow progress in the EU accession process. When they were designed and negotiated, these agreements were meant to be applied as a transitional solution aimed at boosting trade relations. The SAAs signed with the Western Balkans, compared to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, are now considered outdated and provide less flexibility or opportunities for gradual integration.

Overlap with the EU accession process? The SAP is directly linked to the EU accession process, as it serves as the foundation or a first step for a country's eventual EU membership. The implementation of the SAA is set as a condition for the progress in the accession negotiations. The legal and economic reforms required under the SAP closely align with the EU acquis, and the process of aligning with EU standards under the SAA overlaps with many of the chapters negotiated during EU accession talks.

The Energy Community: Partial Integration with the EU's Energy Market

The Energy Community is an international organisation launched in 2005 and has its seat in Vienna, Austria. Its goal was to extend the EU's internal energy market to its neighbours, particularly the Western Balkans. This was to be achieved by creating a unified energy market by integrating the energy policies of non-EU members with EU standards. The logic behind it was to strengthen energy security, sustainability, and market competition.

What is the Energy Community about? The Energy Community focuses on aligning the energy sectors of its members with the EU's legal framework, specifically in electricity, gas, renewable energy, energy efficiency, and environmental protection. By doing so, it facilitates the partial integration of non-EU members into the EU's energy market, enabling them to benefit from EU energy cooperation without full membership.

Who are the members? The Community includes the European Union and nine so-called contracting parties: the six Western Balkans states, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine.

What has it achieved since its launch? Since its creation, the Energy Community has driven forward legislative alignment of the Western Balkans with the EU. Countries in the region have adopted parts of EU energy legislation, promoting competition and liberalising their markets. It has also to some extent facilitated

the integration of renewable energy sources and enabled cross-border energy trading, gradually connecting the Western Balkans to the broader EU energy market.

How is it funded? The Energy Community is funded through contributions from its members, including the Western Balkans contracting parties. The budget supports its initiatives, which focus on regulatory alignment, technical assistance, and capacity building to ensure effective implementation of energy reforms.

What are the challenges? Despite some advancements, several challenges remain. The Western Balkans face difficulties related to political instability, outdated energy infrastructure, and limited financial resources. Moreover, meeting EU environmental standards and reducing reliance on coal are significant obstacles for some in the Western Balkans. Full market liberalisation is still a work in progress in some countries, with state-owned enterprises maintaining a dominant role.

Overlap with the EU enlargement process? The Energy Community's efforts complement the EU accession process, as aligning energy regulations with EU standards is a critical part of the accession negotiations. While the Energy Community helps pave the way for meeting EU energy chapter obligations, its initiatives reflect only a partial integration which does not include all four EU freedoms of movement or obligations to move forward with rule of law reforms.

The Transport Community: Partial Integration with the EU's Transport Market

The Transport Community was officially established in 2017 and has its seat in Belgrade, Serbia. Its aim is integrating the transport markets of the Western Balkans with that of the European Union. It seeks to foster connectivity, improve infrastructure, and harmonise transport regulations in the region, aligning them with EU standards to create a single, interoperable transport area.

What is the Transport Community about? The Transport Community focuses on aligning transport policies and practices in the Western Balkans with EU regulations across various sectors, including road, rail, maritime, and inland waterways. Its main objectives are to improve transport infrastructure, enhance connectivity, increase safety standards, and promote sustainable transport solutions, facilitating the partial integration of the region into the EU transport network and market.

Who are the members? The Transport Community includes the European Union and all six Western Balkan countries. The Community aims to help these countries prepare their transport sectors for eventual EU membership by harmonising their systems with those of the EU.

What has it achieved since its launch? Since its inception, the Transport Community has made some progress in gathering a momentum for improving infrastructure and boosting regional connectivity. Key achievements include the development of the green lanes, introduced as part of the regional efforts to streamline and facilitate the flow of goods across borders, particularly in response to disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. They were designed to prioritise essential goods and reduce waiting times at border crossings. By improving customs procedures, reducing administrative barriers, and enhancing coop-

eration between border authorities, green lanes have helped to ensure a smoother movement of goods also after the pandemic. A similar initiative is now being developed and is being implemented with EU neighbours. These and other efforts by the Transport Community have arguably contributed to more efficient and safer transport networks in the region, enhancing both economic growth and regional cooperation.

How is it financed? The Transport Community is financed through contributions from the EU and its Contracting Parties.

What are the challenges? Despite some visible progress, several challenges remain. The Western Balkan countries often face financial constraints, political instability, and governance issues, which hinder the full implementation of agreed-upon reforms. Upgrading transport infrastructure to meet EU standards requires significant investment, which is often difficult to secure. Additionally, ensuring consistent regulatory enforcement across the region has proven challenging. The partial integration into the EU transport market has not yet been achieved, as no Western Balkan country has managed to reach the necessary level of alignment of its legislation and standards. But even when countries do achieve the necessary level and integrate, this will not include all four EU freedom of movements, and it will not include air transport.

Overlap with the EU accession process? The Transport Community contributes to the EU accession process, notably in the negotiating chapters related to transport. Aligning transport legislation and infrastructure with EU standards is a requirement for eventual EU membership. The Transport Community also acts as a stepping stone for these countries, facilitating partial integration into the EU transport market while preparing them for future accession.

The Western Balkans Investment Framework: Pulling Financial Support Together

The Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) was established in 2009 as a joint initiative by the European Union, international financial institutions, and bilateral donors. Its primary aim is to support socio-economic development by pulling together and coordinating financing and technical assistance for infrastructure and development projects in the region.

What is the WBIF about? The WBIF is a comprehensive financial mechanism designed to pool resources from the EU, international financial institutions, and other donors to fund large-scale infrastructure projects. These projects span sectors such as transport, energy, environment, and social infrastructure (health, education, and housing). The WBIF also provides technical assistance for project preparation and implementation, helping Western Balkan countries align their infrastructure and policies with EU standards.

Who are the beneficiaries? The WBIF covers all six Western Balkan countries. The initiative is supported by the European Commission, international financial institutions (including the European Investment Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the World Bank), and bilateral donors from EU member states.

What has it achieved since its launch? Since its creation, the WBIF has mobilised financial resources to support over 200 projects, with a focus on transport corridors, energy infrastructure, environmental protection, and social services. It has financed the construction of roads, bridges, power plants, and water systems, helping to modernise the region's infrastructure and improve connectivity.

What are the challenges? Despite its successes, the WBIF faces challenges such as delays in project implementation due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, political instability, and limited institutional capacity in some Western Balkan countries. Securing co-financing from national budgets and private sector involvement can also be difficult. Additionally, ensuring compliance with EU environmental and social standards, as well as public procurement, is crucial for successful project execution, but can present obstacles for some projects.

Overlap with the EU accession process? The WBIF is complementary to the EU accession process, as it helps Western Balkan countries implement infrastructure projects that align with the requirements of the EU acquis, particularly in areas like energy, transport, and environmental protection. By improving infrastructure and economic conditions, the WBIF supports broader reforms needed for EU membership.

The Economic and Investment Plan: Boosting Growth and Integration

The Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the Western Balkans was launched by the European Commission in 2020, aiming to support economic recovery, sustainable growth, and convergence with the EU. The plan covers the period from 2021 to 2027, and is presented as a key component of the EU's strategy to drive regional development and facilitate closer integration with the EU.

What is the Economic and Investment Plan about? The EIP focuses on stimulating the Western Balkans' economies by investing in critical infrastructure, green energy, digitalisation, and human capital development. It seeks to enhance regional connectivity, improve the business environment, and foster competitiveness. The plan also promotes sustainable and green growth, digital transformation, and social cohesion, aligning the region with the EU's long-term strategic priorities.

Who are the beneficiaries? The plan targets all six Western Balkan countries.

How is it financed? The Economic and Investment Plan is financed through a combination of EU grants (up to €9 billion of pre-accession funds and bilateral contributions by EU member states), as well as guarantees and loans through the Western Balkans Guarantee facility, under the EU External Action Guarantee and the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus, launched in 2020 as part of the EIP, which is expected to mobilise potentially investments of up to €20 billion until 2030 (up to €30 billion in total).

What has it achieved since its launch? Since its launch, the EIP has identified 10 investment flagships. By October 2023, the EU has approved funding of €4.29 billion in grants, expected to mobilise €15.9 billion in overall investments. Key achievements include the initiation of large infrastructure projects, such as road and railway networks, improvements in energy efficiency, and support for the region's green transition.

What are the challenges? The EIP faces several challenges, including the need for substantial administrative and governance improvements in candidate countries. Additionally, securing sufficient co-financing from private and public sources remains a hurdle.

Overlap with the EU accession process? It complements the EU accession process, as the reforms and investments it promotes are designed to bring the Western Balkans closer to EU standards. It supports key areas of the acquis, particularly in infrastructure, energy, and economic governance. However, the scale of the investments required and the need for sustained reform present significant challenges.

The Green Agenda: Advancing Environmental Integration

The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans was launched in October 2020 as part of the EU's Economic and Investment Plan for the region. Its primary aim is to align the Western Balkans with the EU's environmental policies, particularly the European Green Deal, to support sustainable development, reduce carbon emissions, and transition towards a circular economy.

What is the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans about? The Green Agenda focuses on environmental protection, decarbonisation, circular economy, combating pollution, and sustainable food systems. It seeks to promote renewable energy, energy efficiency, biodiversity conservation, and waste reduction, as well as enhancing the region's capacity to respond to climate change. The agenda mirrors the EU's European Green Deal and integrates the Western Balkans into the EU's broader sustainability goals, offering pathways for cooperation and investment in green technologies.

Who are the beneficiaries? The Green Agenda applies to all six Western Balkan countries.

What has it achieved since its launch? Since its launch, the Green Agenda has achieved limited results. In 2021, the region agreed on the Action Plan for the implementation of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (2021–2030). The Action Plan outlines specific steps, designates supporting organisations, and provides an indicative timeframe for each measure to be implemented. It establishes a framework for the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and countries concerned to coordinate and support the effective implementation of these measures and to monitor progress accordingly. The EU has provided technical and financial support to help develop and start its implementation. Early achievements include commitments to phase out coal and greater regional cooperation on tackling environmental challenges. However, the region is still in the early stages of fully implementing the targets set by the Green Agenda.

How is it funded? The Green Agenda is financed through the EU's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans. This funding aims to support green projects, infrastructure improvements, and technical assistance to help the region meet its environmental goals.

What are the challenges? The Green Agenda faces several challenges, including the heavy reliance of some Western Balkan countries on coal, limited financial resources, and outdated infrastructure. Political instability and varying levels of commitment to environmental reforms across the region also present hurdles. Additionally, there is a need for stronger institutional capacity to ensure the successful implementation of the Green Agenda's goals.

Overlap with the EU accession process? The Green Agenda is linked to the EU accession process, as environmental sustainability and alignment with EU environmental standards are components of the *acquis communautaire*. Progress on the Green Agenda contributes to fulfilling the criteria for EU membership, particularly under the environment and energy chapters.

The New Growth Plan: More Funds and EU Single Market Access for Greater Reforms

The New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, introduced in 2023 by the European Commission, seeks to accelerate economic growth and enhance integration with the EU single market. The plan is envisaged to last until 2027, and it offers increased funding and access to the EU's single market as incentives for deeper and more comprehensive reforms across the region.

What is the New Growth Plan about? The plan aims to drive economic development by promoting socio-economic reforms as well as reforms in the area of fundamentals (rule of law and public administration). Each country was expected to develop detailed reform agendas, with very specific sets of reforms and timetables for its implementation. Success in implementation of reforms will allow countries to benefit from increased funding. Furthermore, the Western Balkans are offered easier access or integration into specific areas of the EU single market.

Who are the beneficiaries? All six Western Balkan countries.

How is it funded? The plan is funded through additional €6 billion - raised by member states but implemented by the European Commission - for the period 2024 to 2027 (with €2 billion grants, and €4 billion loans). Access to money is linked to the successful implementation of agreed reforms.

What has it achieved since its launch? Although still in its early phase, the New Growth Plan has so far seen countries negotiate and agree on detailed reform agendas (except Bosnia and Herzegovina). First tranches of money were expected to flow by the end of 2024. As for the integration with the EU Single Market, at least three countries are expected to be ready to join the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA) during 2025. This is an EU initiative that simplifies cross-border euro transactions by allowing individuals and businesses to make and receive payments under the same conditions as domestic transactions within member countries. At the moment it covers 36 countries, including EU member states, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, and others. For the Western Balkans, joining SEPA would mean easier, faster, and cheaper cross-border transactions with the EU, promoting greater economic integration, facilitating trade, and improving financial cooperation.

What are the challenges? Challenges are mostly of political nature, such as uneven commitments to reforms and institutional weaknesses in some Western Balkan countries. Bosnia and Herzegovina being the case in point, as it is the only country that has not submitted its final reform agenda due to political disagreement in the country.

Overlap with the EU accession process? The New Growth Plan has links with the EU accession process. Its focus on economic reforms and sectoral improvements, as well as fundamentals, directly supports the criteria for EU membership, especially in areas such as competitiveness, market regulation, and digital transformation. Also, integration with and easier access to the EU Single Market will help countries align with EU standards in those areas.

EU Programmes: Opportunities for Integration and Beneficial Cooperation

The Western Balkans' participation in EU programmes plays a role in fostering closer ties between the region and the European Union. Western Balkan countries are in some of the programmes full members, while in others participate as observers, or only partially. Their participation and access to these programmes is often funded via Pre-Accession Funds. This engagement allows the Western Balkans to benefit from EU programmes, which include additional funding opportunities, expertise, and networks. These in turn help build capacities and advance reforms. For the EU, including the Western Balkans into these initiatives strengthens regional cooperation, prepares countries for eventual EU membership, and promotes alignment with EU standards and values.

Here is a brief overview of selected EU programmes mentioned in the European Commission's annual reports:

Horizon Europe is the EU's funding programme for research and innovation, with a focus on tackling global challenges and fostering scientific and technological excellence.

Competitiveness of Enterprises and Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Programme (COSME) supports small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) by improving access to finance, supporting entrepreneurship, and facilitating better market access.

Erasmus+ is the EU's programme for education, training, youth, and sport, promoting student and staff exchanges, collaboration between universities, and youth mobility.

Creative Europe supports the cultural and creative sectors by funding initiatives that promote cultural diversity, creative industries, and cross-border cooperation.

The Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) promotes the protection of rights, equality, and democratic values across Europe.

Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) is an EU programme that promotes high-quality employment, social protection, and inclusion. Participation helps develop stronger social policies and employment services.

The Digital Europe Programme aims to accelerate the digital transformation of Europe's economy, society, and public services. Participation in it enables to develop its digital infrastructure and build capacities in areas such as cybersecurity and artificial intelligence.

Customs 2020 supports the cooperation between national customs administrations in the EU to ensure the functioning of the EU customs union. Involvement helps improve customs procedures, promote trade facilitation, and enhance regional security.

Fiscalis 2020 is an EU programme that supports the cooperation between tax authorities across Europe. Participation allows for alignment with EU tax standards, helping to modernise the tax systems and fight tax fraud.

Justice, Europe for Citizens focusses on strengthening justice, citizens' rights, and fundamental freedoms across Europe. It helps participants to align their legal and justice systems with EU norms, promoting rule of law and human rights.

The Civil Protection Mechanism of the Union facilitates cooperation in disaster response and preparedness. Western Balkans' participation enhances their disaster management capacities and regional collaboration in crisis situations.

The Single Market Programme supports the effective functioning of the EU's single market by promoting regulatory cooperation, market surveillance, and consumer protection. Western Balkans' involvement helps them prepare for deeper integration with the EU market by aligning regulations and standards.

The EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) provides independent, evidence-based advice on fundamental rights issues to EU institutions and member states. Western Balkan countries with observer status benefit from FRA's expertise to strengthen their legal frameworks, protect human rights, and align with EU standards on rule of law and fundamental freedoms.

EU Member States Initiatives: Strengthening Regional Cooperation and Integration

Several EU member states have launched their individual initiatives aimed at enhancing political, economic, and social cooperation in the Western Balkans, accelerating their EU integration. Among the most notable are the Berlin Process and the Brdo-Brijuni Process, which have been used to promote regional dialogue, reconciliation, and practical cooperation across various sectors. These initiatives provide vital platforms for addressing regional challenges and furthering the EU enlargement agenda in the Western Balkans.

The Berlin Process was initiated in 2014 by Germany, under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel, as a response to slowing momentum in the EU enlargement process. The aim was to maintain the EU's commitment to the Western Balkans by promoting regional cooperation, economic development, and political stability. The Berlin Process focuses on boosting connectivity, reconciliation, and fostering cooperation between Western Balkan countries through infrastructure pro-

jects, youth exchanges, and dialogue initiatives. Key successes include: the Connectivity Agenda, the Western Balkans Common Regional Market (CRM), and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO).

The Brdo-Brijuni Process was launched by Slovenia and Croatia, two EU member states with deep historical and geographical ties to the Western Balkans. The initiative aims to promote political dialogue and strengthen the region's EU integration process through high-level political meetings. It provides a forum for leaders of the Western Balkans to engage in dialogue with each other and with EU member states. The process has served as a platform for addressing political tensions and promoting reconciliation among the Western Balkan countries. The Brdo-Brijuni Process has consistently reaffirmed the region's European perspective and lobbied for stronger EU engagement, especially during periods of scepticism about further enlargement.

EU-Western Balkans Political Dialogue: Strengthening Political Ties

The European Union has launched several initiatives aimed at fostering political dialogue and exchange with the Western Balkans, promoting stability, cooperation, and integration in the region. One of the most prominent platforms for such political exchange are the EU-Western Balkans Summits, alongside other high-level meetings and dialogues. These initiatives serve as opportunities for both the EU and Western Balkan countries to discuss key political, economic, and security issues while advancing the region's path towards EU accession.

The EU-Western Balkans Summits are high-level political meetings between EU leaders and heads of state or government from the six Western Balkan countries. Initially these Summits were held on an irregular basis. In 2018, they were planned to become bi-annual summits. Since 2020, however, they are taking place annually, in the second half of the year.

The outcomes of these summits have included reaffirming the EU's commitment to the Western Balkans' future EU membership, providing political support for ongoing reforms, and launching regional initiatives like the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. The Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 was particularly significant, as it endorsed the Western Balkans' perspective of future EU membership. More recent summits have focused on boosting economic cooperation, addressing security challenges, and reinforcing regional integration. These summits play a role in ensuring that political dialogue remains active and that progress towards EU accession stays on track despite regional or global challenges.

The EU and Regional Cooperation: Strengthening Ties for Stability and Growth

The European Union has long promoted regional cooperation in the Western Balkans as a crucial element for peace, stability, and economic growth in the region. Since at least 1999, the EU has provided significant political, technical, and financial support to foster collaboration among Western Balkan countries, with the ultimate goal of enhancing regional stability and advancing their European integration.

What is the EU's support for regional cooperation about? The EU's support for regional cooperation in the Western Balkans focuses on fostering political dialogue, economic integration, and reconciliation among the countries in the region. Key areas of cooperation include trade, infrastructure development, energy, and security. By encouraging the Western Balkans to work together on shared challenges, the EU aims to stabilise the region, reduce political tensions, and facilitate progress on the path towards EU membership.

Who are the beneficiaries? This policy targets all six Western Balkan countries, as well as regional organisations.

What has it achieved since its launch? EU-backed regional cooperation has led to several important milestones.

RCC (Regional Cooperation Council): Established in 2008 and based in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Regional Cooperation Council is an intergovernmental organisation that promotes regional cooperation and European integration in the Western Balkans, focusing on areas such as economic development, connectivity, security, and digitalisation.

CEFTA (Central European Free Trade Agreement): Established in 1992 and based in Brussels, Belgium, CEFTA is a trade agreement that facilitates the free movement of goods, services, and investments among its members, primarily the Western Balkan countries (since 2006), to promote regional economic integration.

ReSPA (Regional School of Public Administration): Established in 2010 with a seat in Danilovgrad, Montenegro, ReSPA is an international organisation that supports the development of public administration in the Western Balkans by offering training, capacity building, and promoting regional cooperation in public sector reforms.

RYCO (Regional Youth Cooperation Office): Established in 2016 with a seat in Tirana, Albania, RYCO is an intergovernmental organisation that promotes reconciliation and cooperation among young people in the Western Balkans through exchange programmes and regional initiatives.

Western Balkans Fund (WBF): Established in 2017 with a seat in Tirana, Albania, the Western Balkans Fund is an intergovernmental organisation that promotes regional cooperation and development in the Western Balkans through funding civil society projects. It supports initiatives in areas such as cultural exchange, education, sustainable development, and youth cooperation.

Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG): Established in 2005 with a seat in Skopje, North Macedonia, the SWG is an intergovernmental organisation that fosters regional cooperation in rural development among the Western Balkans six and Moldova. It focuses on improving rural livelihoods, sustainable agriculture, and regional integration by facilitating policy dialogue, capacity building, and cross-border initiatives. In September 2024, participating countries adopted a declaration emphasising the commitment to regional cooperation and EU integration, focusing on agriculture, rural development, and food security. It highlighted key priorities, including the Green Agenda, climate change adaptation, generational renewal in rural areas, and policy harmonisation to meet EU standards by 2030.

How is it funded? The EU funds regional cooperation mostly through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA). These funding mechanisms support a wide range of projects, for specific regional organisations, but also cross-border cooperation and connectivity.

What are the challenges? While EU support has yielded progress, several challenges remain. Political tensions between some Western Balkan countries, unresolved disputes, and nationalist rhetoric continue to hinder deeper cooperation. Additionally, economic disparities and differences in institutional capacities pose challenges to fully leveraging the benefits of regional initiatives.

Beyond the Accession Process – Mapping the EU's initiatives in the Western Balkans

Overlap with the EU accession process? Regional cooperation is directly linked to the EU accession process, as the EU views collaboration among Western Balkan countries as essential for ensuring stability and prosperity in the region. The EU has also set regional coop-

eration as a condition for EU accession, and it monitors the state of play and progress in regional and bilateral cooperation among countries of the Western Balkans in its regular reports.

Regional Economic Integration: The Common Regional Market

The Common Regional Market (CRM) for the Western Balkans, launched in 2020 during the Berlin Process Summit in Sofia, is a framework aimed at fostering regional economic integration. The logic behind it is that it would prepare the Western Balkans for their eventual inclusion in the EU's single market. It builds on the Regional Economic Area (REA), introduced in 2017, by aligning the region's economic policies with EU standards and fostering collaboration in areas such as trade, investment, and digitalisation.

In October 2024, marking the 10th anniversary of the Berlin Process, the leaders of the Western Balkans adopted a Declaration and the accompanying Action Plan for 2025–2028. It aims to enhance, broaden, and deepen economic collaboration by overcoming small and fragmented markets, boosting competitiveness, attracting investment, and developing human capital.

What is the Common Regional Market about? The CRM focuses on creating a closer economic space within the Western Balkans by promoting the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people. It aims to develop a more competitive and attractive market for businesses and investors while aligning with EU regulations. The CRM also places a strong emphasis on digital integration, green growth, and developing the region's human capital, positioning it as one of the pillars of the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.

Who are the beneficiaries? The CRM includes the six Western Balkan countries.

What has it achieved since its launch? The CRM has facilitated the removal of trade barriers within the region, enhanced regional transport and energy infrastructure, and promoted cross-border e-commerce and business cooperation. The 2021–2024 CRM Action Plan foresaw improvements in intra-regional trade, economic integration, and business-to-business collaboration. The recent CRM Action Plan for 2025–2028 is expected to further accelerate these developments, promising to add an estimated 10 percent to the region's gross domestic product (GDP).

How is it funded? The CRM is financially supported by the European Union, primarily through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) and the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF). Additional financial backing comes from regional and international institutions.

What are the challenges? Despite the CRM's progress, challenges remain, such as political tensions between countries involved, as well as fragmented markets, and differing levels of economic development across the region. Implementing agreements and harmonising policies with EU standards while addressing domestic concerns requires significant institutional capacity and political will.

Overlap with the EU accession process? The EU has set regional cooperation as a condition for EU accession. The CRM plays a role in turning that into reality. Furthermore, by aligning their economies with EU standards, the Western Balkan countries are better prepared to meet the economic and regulatory conditions required for EU membership. The new CRM Action Plan 2025–2028 aims to move countries of the region towards integration into some aspects of the EU's single market.

Conclusion: Everything is the EU accession process

The EU's engagement beyond the EU accession process has made progress in the Western Balkans more likely, with growth in regional economies, increased trade with the EU, and some advances in key sectors like energy, transport, and the environment. However, challenges such as political instability, governance issues, and economic disparities persist, often delaying reforms and creating frustration both in the region and within the EU.

While EU membership remains the ultimate goal, the initiatives discussed show the EU's commitment to supporting the Western Balkans beyond accession. These efforts offer flexible opportunities for collaboration, helping the region align with EU standards while addressing immediate needs. Success will depend on the Western Balkans' ability to tackle its obstacles and on the EU's sustained support and ability to offer a credible path to full membership.