

## Moving towards Integration

In 2003, at the Thessaloniki Summit, the European Union (EU) announced a clear membership perspective for the Western Balkans. However, despite ongoing efforts, challenges have persisted, and apart from Croatia no other state from the region has succeeded so far to join the Union. The main reasons for these challenges were political blockades, unresolved bilateral issues in the region, and internal challenges affecting the EU, as well as deficient geopolitical thinking in Brussels and some EU capitals regarding the Western Balkans. Now with two years of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East, there is a growing awareness that something should be done regarding the EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. Currently, in Brussels and some EU capitals, one popular idea on how to move forward is the concept of “frontrunners.” According to this idea, these are the candidates that have a chance for a faster integration process and can serve as examples to others.

To discuss these issues and ideas, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) in cooperation with the Federal Foreign Office of Germany (AA) organized on May 7, 2024, in Podgorica, Montenegro, a roundtable for senior officials of the main political parties from the Western Balkans. The roundtable is part of a larger initiative to strengthen the region in the face of new geopolitical challenges. The discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule. CIG’s Senior Associate Igor Novakovic drafted this report. The report does not necessarily represent the views of individual participants, CIG, or AA. It instead reflects the discussion as a whole, and CIG is solely responsible for its content.

### Prospects for Integration

The Western Balkans are at a delicate moment, and it seems that everyone is waiting for something to happen. A participant described it as an “*interregnum*,” where the new security situation caused by the war in Ukraine has not changed the mindset in the EU capitals regarding the Western Balkans integration. The pace of integration has not accelerated either. However, many voices argue that the situation has indeed changed, and precisely because of the war the EU is reapproaching the integration of the Western Balkans. Another participant pointed out that the EU does not have enough capacity and time to devote to the region at this moment. Elections in the EU and the US are forthcoming, and key figures who were dealing with the region are about to leave their current posts. Two significant issues remain unresolved and are still simmering: the Kosovo-Serbia dispute and the tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the other hand, political blockades of the integration processes for Western Balkans candidates are still looming, which is quite evident in the case of North Macedonia.

For these challenges and the prospects of integration, the key also lies in the outcome of the upcoming EU elections. Even more critical is to observe how the next EU Commission will be

composed and who will lead the DGs, with particular emphasis on the DG NEAR, responsible for the enlargement. Several participants emphasized the need for a person of influence in that position, someone who will push the EU for faster integration and also expecting the candidate countries to reciprocate. Additionally, another participant highlighted two other important signals. The first is the new EU budget, which will clarify if funds will be allocated for enlargement. The second signal is regarding the new EU Special Representative for the Western Balkans after Miroslav Lajcak departs. This person must possess integrity and strong political support from both Brussels and the EU member states.

For the advanced pace of integration, there are practical challenges, including the aforementioned unresolved disputes. Some countries also face issues with EU values and may likely reject integration due to standards derived from them. Additionally, some could refuse due to the so-called “Sanader dilemma,” meaning that implementing pro-EU reforms could directly jeopardize their own rule or lead to repercussions after they lose power. To materialize integration, candidate countries also require support from the EU, given the widespread lack of local capacity.

A participant emphasized the necessity for a concrete plan on how to proceed, based on mutual commitment. “There is a need for a clear declaration of intent for the incoming newcomers, some kind of Thessaloniki 2.” Without an enlargement plan, leaders will not take the EU's intentions and push seriously, viewing it as “a fake enlargement attempt.” Another participant highlighted that while the Growth Plan is a good start, it's evident that it's only a temporary measure, not a strategic plan. “We need a strategic plan from the EU, and a renewed, clearly stated commitment.” Another participant underscored that the entire experience with the visa liberalization process for Kosovo and the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue suggest to politicians that the EU will not deliver, even when promises are made. Agenda 2030 is not the agenda for the new member states, it is for the reform of the EU itself, the participant added. However, the 2030 target could still work if there is a push from the EU with concrete and new mechanisms that will gradually integrate the region.

Another participant emphasized that the influence of Russia and China is evidently present in the region, and the EU needs to take concrete steps to address it. He added that until now, the EU has not demonstrated the pace and strength required to tackle this challenge effectively. However, other participants suggested that the presence of Russia in Serbia might be “overblown,” as propaganda is domestically produced and used as leverage. They called for a more realistic approach, portraying the situation on the ground in less dramatic terms. Additionally, participants discussed other issues such as depopulation and economic transformation in the region.

## **Frontrunners**

The idea of frontrunners is not new, but it has resurfaced with the new Government of Montenegro, the apparent stabilization of this country, and the renewed awareness in some of the EU capitals that action should be taken. Montenegro, being small enough and part of NATO (which is important in the current geopolitical context), allows the EU to proceed with integration without significant reforms. Thus, the EU and some member states are banking on the potential of Montenegro serving as a “role model” for the region. A participant from Montenegro stressed that again the EU integration is presented in a populist manner, and criticized the Government for presenting the Interim Benchmark Report that Podgorica received as “some kind of an EU

membership.” “What is happening in reality is that the EU is pushing reforms on paper but the actual implementation is lagging, and the question is if it will happen.”

However, in Montenegro, there is a full political party spectrum supporting integration, and more than 80 percent of the population are also in favor. The major issue in Montenegro is internal polarization, which has not ceased after the change of the ruling elite. Regional dynamics are also affecting Montenegro’s stability, and this is something the EU should take into account.

Many participants opposed the idea of a sole frontrunner, highlighting two pitfalls associated with that approach. The first concern is that Montenegro's EU accession alone may neither influence local "strong-hand" leaders, nor increase local demand in other candidates to change internal political logic and discourse. The other danger is that Montenegro's integration could decrease interest in the region for some EU member states, similar to what happened after Croatia's integration in 2013. The process of ratifying EU accession is complex and lengthy, and it's always preferable if conducted as a group. Moreover, public opinion in many EU member states remains against enlargement, raising the question of when the next window of opportunity might appear.

“Frontrunning” in terms of the accession process is only significant if that country or countries behave as leaders – then there could be a clear spillover effect on the others. If one country joins alone, it would also be much more costly, as there is also an issue of the Schengen border that will become the border of Montenegro with all of its neighboring states.

Hence, participants have suggested that a much better approach is to consider a group integration of candidates that are willing and able. They suggested that this group might consist of Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania. “The group approach would make an impression in the region, and not a sole integration of just one country,” a participant concluded.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

The following conclusions and recommendations reflect the discussions and were proposed by the participants.

- The region and individual states cannot make progress alone without a push from Brussels. The EU should develop a concrete and credible plan for enlargement, renew its commitment, and establish a clear roadmap. This plan should be complemented by clear policies and instruments, developed in consultation with the candidates.
- The current process of enlargement is more complex than in previous rounds. The EU should not add new conditions, and it should offer more predictability and establish clear benchmarks.
- The process of enlargement lacks strong leadership. When some Western Balkan candidates show commitment, the EU does not reciprocate adequately. Often, the same happens the other way around. The EU should continue to insist on values and conditions, but if one state delivers in one area (especially regarding the rule of law), the EU should respond with concrete action.
- The Western Balkan states should focus on the prize, which is EU integration, and not on infighting. Countries in the region should maintain a pragmatic and focused approach, always keeping the end goal in mind. It is suggested that the Western Balkans should strive to replicate

the overall political consensus in the EU regarding the minimum requirements the region needs.

- The region needs to develop a common initiative for EU integration. If there is a 'pull' from the EU for integration, it would be valuable to have a common and joint push from the Western Balkans. This push, which participants have dubbed as a belief in the region's future as an 'EU regional group,' is essential.
- The EU should follow up on the toughest decisions, especially regarding unresolved issues. A clear example of such a decision is the Greece-North Macedonia Prespa Agreement, which was costly for the ruling elite in Skopje, yet the EU did not follow up. Instead, new political blockades have appeared.

## Participants

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