

A Shared Path to Stability and EU Membership for the Western Balkans

Introduction

The Western Balkans remains high on EU's agenda, but progress toward membership is slow. Internal ethnic divisions, bilateral political disputes, and insufficient EU support are key obstacles. A demographic crisis further complicates the region's future. Poor economic opportunities are driving emigration, draining talent and weakening its long-term capacity for growth. "We can stop this only if we make our region attractive and livable," a speaker noted. Others suggested the EU could do more to help.

Ethnic divisions, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, continue to dominate political and social narratives despite the last war in the region ending over a quarter century ago. Nationalism remains a powerful force. It helps you win and lose election and power. The region's slow reforms, corruption, and authoritarian tendencies weaken institutions and increase public disillusionment. "Can we overcome these challenges and build states and societies compatible with EU standards?" one speaker asked. "The solution lies in finding a common ground for a better future," another responded. "The external actors can help us, but the burden lays with us," the speaker added.

Despite frustrations with leaderships and doubts about EU integration, public support for the EU remains strong, signaling hope for a shared regional vision. Opportunities exist. The Common Regional Market (CRM) could boost economic growth and regional cooperation. The EU's growth plan and the Berlin Process are also key mechanisms. Many participants emphasized that the EU and the US support are critical to resolving disputes and advancing EU membership. "We can't do it alone." Participants proposed a timeline for full membership by 2030 or 2033 as realistic, optimistic that internal governance issues, reforms, internal and bilateral disputes, and demographic decline can be addressed by then.

These insights came from a roundtable organized by the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) in cooperation with the German Federal Foreign Office in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, on November 14-15, 2024. The roundtable was part of a larger project on regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. The discussions, held under the Chatham House Rule, do not necessarily reflect the views of individual participants, CIG, or the German Federal Foreign Office.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. Promote regional integration through the Common Regional Market

By 2027, the implementation of the CRM should be prioritized to enhance cross-border collaboration, trade, and economic growth. This initiative not only serves as tangible evidence of the benefits of cooperation but also builds trust among stakeholders and lays the groundwork for broader regional integration efforts. The EU, the US, and regional actors like the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) should continue to facilitate the CRM's implementation. Resolution of recent disputes between Kosovo and Serbia demonstrates that progress is achievable, even in the face of persistent political challenges.

The CRM action plan has already achieved some notable success; however, as one speaker emphasized, "We need more concrete progress and not just verbal commitments." The EU's growth plan is another positive step toward improving the region's standards, which currently stand at just 50 percent of the EU's poorest member state. At the current pace, it would take 60 years to reach EU's average growth rate. Economic regional integration through the CRM offers a promising path forward. If implemented effectively, it could potentially double the region's economic growth by 2027. However, the CRM has its limitation. Only about 15 percent of trade takes place among the countries in the region. Over 70 of trade is with the EU. So, mechanisms that facilitate trade between the region and the EU far outweigh the regional cooperation.

2. Apply an inclusive yet merit-based EU accession framework

The EU in cooperation with the Western Balkans should establish an ambitious yet achievable timeline, targeting the simultaneous accession of all six Western Balkan countries by 2030 or 2033 at the latest, individually or as a group. To advance this goal, the EU should accelerate negotiations with the five existing candidates and take decisive steps to grant Kosovo candidate status in 2025. A dynamic and inclusive approach can help prevent deepening regional divisions and maintain public trust in the EU's commitment. However, countries that demonstrate faster progress should be rewarded individually, enabling them to join without waiting for slower peers.

That said, some participants challenged the notion of a merit-based race, arguing that the accession process is currently stalled. "There is no race," one participant noted. "The door to EU membership is closed. No one is running; everyone is in a waiting line." Another speaker emphasized that the region remains on the EU's periphery, urging the Union to bring the Western Balkans closer to its core.

Opinions on the EU's criteria varied. Some argued the bar is set too high, making membership seem unachievable, while others blamed the EU's persistent "enlargement fatigue." Many concluded that the region, given its small population and territory, should not pose a significant burden for the EU even accepting it as it is. Others, however, said the EU's criteria are clear and achievable, asserting that membership is guaranteed if the region fulfills its obligations. "The EU should not lower its standards. The region must do its homework," one speaker argued.

Despite these perspectives, there was broad consensus on the need for the EU and the US to maintain a proactive role in resolving disputes, facilitating and when necessary enforcing agreements, and ensuring the implementation of key reforms. International engagement and resources remain essential to stabilizing the region and preparing it for eventual EU membership.

3. Tackle depopulation with a comprehensive *brain-regain* strategy

To address the pressing challenge of depopulation, the region must develop and implement policies that encourage emigrants to return, bringing back valuable expertise to promote innovation and development. An effective brain-regain strategy should focus on investments in education, healthcare, and public services to retain talent and make the region more livable and attractive.

Depopulation remains one of the region's most critical issues, but a well-crafted strategy could reverse this trend by attracting skilled professionals back home. Highlighting success stories of returnees who have contributed to economic growth can inspire others and strengthen the region's human capital.

The EU could play a vital role by designating the Western Balkans as a special interest zone, providing the region with additional attention and support. As one speaker noted, "More attention would accelerate the progress." Both the EU and region must adopt a more ambitious approach to make the Western Balkans a desirable and viable place to live and work.

4. Rebuild public confidence in EU integration

The EU accession process should be leveraged as a unifying framework to inspire reforms and deliver tangible benefits to citizens. Regional leaders should set clear milestones, track progress, and demonstrate how integration can improve daily life to sustain public support.

Citizens in the region prioritize economic issues, inflation, and public safety over ethnic politics. However, frustrations with governance and eroding trust in democratic institutions persist. Many citizens doubt their leaders' capacity to deliver solid progress. While support for EU membership remains strong, skepticism about whether leaders can achieve it undermines public optimism. Fears of renewed conflict are significant, with 40 percent of respondents in a recent poll believing that polarization could escalate into violence. Some argued that "EU's inconsistent leadership" has also slowed progress toward integration."

5. Invest in infrastructure and improve regional connectivity

Accelerating infrastructure projects, such as green lanes and resource-sharing agreements, is essential to enhance connectivity, trade, and regional integration. EU financial support should be strategically aligned with long-term regional development goals to maximize economic impact and create a more interconnected Western Balkans.

Economic growth can also be driven by advancing technology transfer to improve local production capacity and competitiveness. Promoting innovation and modernization in key industries will strengthen the region's economic foundation and generate job opportunities. "Technology transfer will lift our production capacity," a participant emphasized.

6. Close the chapter on the past

The past remains an unresolved issue in the Western Balkans, continuing to affect multiethnic democracy and keeping the “idea of ethnic borders alive.” Nationalists frequently win elections, and voters often fail to reward leaders for good behavior. As one speaker noted, the Social Democrats in North Macedonia lost elections because they were perceived as conceding too much to their neighbors, Greece and Bulgaria—both EU members.

Ironically, some EU member states contribute to keeping “the past alive in the Balkans,” further straining stability and delaying the EU accession process. Addressing these disputes requires structural reforms, reconciliation efforts, and active engagement from international actors such as the EU. Politicians should also support grassroots reconciliation initiatives and civil society projects that promote interethnic dialogue, shared ambitions, and mutual understanding. Such efforts can counter divisive nationalist rhetoric, alleviate fears of renewed conflict, and promoting peace across the region.

7. Make Bosnia and Herzegovina more functional

Bosnia and Herzegovina faces significant challenges in achieving functionality due to diverging views among leading political forces representing its three constituent groups regarding the country’s future. Opinions vary on NATO membership, with some supporting it and others opposing it. Similarly, there are differences on the path to EU membership, with some groups expressing skepticism about the process and losing focus and dedication. These divergencies, combined with a cumbersome decision-making process and high levels of ethnic and political mistrust, hinder progress. National ambitions remain misaligned, making it difficult to establish a cohesive vision for the country.

Efforts to centralize and streamline decision-making were met with skepticism by some participants, who argued, “Decision-making will be difficult under any system as long as these largely ethnic-based differences on national goals persist.” While the country has opened negotiations with the EU, it risks losing financial support from the EU’s growth plan due to internal political deadlock.

To address some of these challenges, participants suggested appoint the country’s chief negotiator as soon as possible to streamline the EU accession process and improve coordination.

8. An uncertain future ahead

The Western Balkans face many uncertainties about the future. The position of the new US administration on the region remains unclear, as does the stance of Germany’s eventual new government. The direction and effectiveness of the Berlin Process are also open questions, with some suggesting that this initiative needs greater clarity and stability. These developments will have a significant impact on the region. However, as one speaker noted, “We have to do our homework regardless of these developments.” The region should continue to address internal challenges and take advantage of opportunities, regardless of external uncertainties.

9. Topics for 2025

Participants proposed the following priority topics for 2025: a) Achieving EU membership for the region by 2030 or 2033; b) Strengthening regional cooperation and integration; c) Advancing the CRM initiative; d) Taking advantage of the EU's growth plan; e) Expanding green lanes and developing efficient trade practices; f) Building an inclusive process of cooperation among parliaments, businesses, and civil society; g) Maintaining the attractiveness of EU integration as a unifying force for societal cohesion, internal reforms, and external integration; h) Emulating best practices from within the region while avoiding negative examples; i) Promoting good governance, with a focus on anti-corruption measures; j) Improving the region's reputation; k) Addressing bilateral relations to prevent negative interference in internal affairs; l) Tackling broader regional and geopolitical challenges; and m) Accelerating the resolution of internal disputes.

The Western Balkans are at a pivotal moment, facing significant internal and external challenges. However, as many participants emphasized, the region has the capacity to overcome these obstacles if it works together and leverages support from the EU and the US.

Urgent issues include addressing ethnic divisions, weak governance, and the demographic crisis, all of which demand strong and visionary leadership. Participants agreed that regional leaders and institutions must work together to promote reconciliation, advance economic and social integration, and implement key reforms.

Aligning governance and legislation with EU standards is essential to bringing the region from the EU's periphery closer to its center. The vision of achieving full membership by 2030 or 2033 is within reach—provided all stakeholders, both local and international, act decisively and with a shared sense of purpose.

Participants

English Alphabetical Order

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