

Advancing Regional Security Cooperation in the Western Balkans

Introduction

On October 6, 2025, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) convened a regional roundtable in Tirana, Albania. The discussion brought together senior politicians from the six Western Balkan countries to explore ways to advance regional security cooperation, with a focus on building both domestic and regional consensus around EU reforms. The roundtable was part of a CIG regional project supported by the German Federal Foreign Office (AA). The event continued the dialogue initiated at previous discussions within the project, particularly the Budva roundtable in May 2025 and the Skopje roundtable in July 2025.

The discussion focused on issues related to security in the region at a time of deeper global polarization, rampant wars in the wider neighborhood of the European Union (EU), new security threats, the retreat of the United States from Europe, the cracks in the transatlantic alliance, and foreign meddling in the region. Participants agreed that the Western Balkans still consumes security instead of producing it. The region, they said, should be a contributor, not a liability. The roundtable aimed to identify key security challenges, risks, and threats, as well as to offer possible answers on how to strengthen effective regional security cooperation. Participants outlined the persistence of the remnants of the conflicts of the 1990s, the challenges they pose, and why they remain so present in public discourse, hindering opportunities for greater regional security cooperation. They also emphasized that the Western Balkans do not exist in a vacuum and that many threats and challenges are cross-border—both within the region and between it and the EU. Many noted that the EU, facing crises with Russia and China needs the region’s help—not more competition for attention. The Western Balkans should offer a contribution to European stability, not demand it.

This report captures the main themes and insights from the discussions, offering key takeaways from the debate and providing conclusions and recommendations that are not based on consensus and do not necessarily reflect the views of CIG or AA. The roundtable was held under the Chatham House Rule. The report was prepared by Igor Novakovic, CIG’s Senior Associate.

Key Takeaways

Rhetorics of Warmongering and Security Dilemma

Several participants emphasized the growing use of negative rhetoric in the region. It is not just rhetoric but also concrete actions such as military parades, increases in defense spending, and announcements of new “alliances” or defense partnerships, as well as the slowdown of national economies. As one participant noted, over the past five years there has been a 50% increase in defense and armament spending in the region, but also a 50% increase in prices. This rise follows NATO standards, but also fuels fear and suspicion. It creates a regional “security dilemma” where everyone doubts everyone else. Thus, there is a climate in which everyone is questioning the intentions of others, and where it becomes easy to mask failures in a populist manner with negative rhetoric about neighbors. This dynamic is further amplified by deep political polarization within and between political actors in the region. “One isolated incident can fuel processes already in motion and contribute to a spiral of escalation.” The Banjska incident in Kosovo was mentioned as a reminder of how one event can shake regional stability and expose deeper domestic weaknesses. This could be attractive for third actors to increase their involvement. Some participants stressed that there is no real potential for war in the region and that these are largely political boogeymen—but that such rhetoric is dangerous, as it hinders regional cooperation.

Several participants stressed that the main driver for warmongering rhetoric is corruption and economic slowdown, and that the easiest way to divert attention is to present nationalist agendas exploiting deeply entrenched insecurities and fears. Others added that some leaders deliberately keep fear alive because they need an enemy. “The idea of one country invading another serves politics more than truth.” Participants thus suggested that the issue of corruption should be placed at the top of the agenda in regional processes, and at the same time, pressure should be exerted on leaders to tone down their rhetoric.

Several participants also suggested that both formal and informal formats focus on regional confidence-building measures (CBMs) that would help overcome the security dilemma and open pathways toward cooperation. They agreed that words alone don’t start conflicts—but fear and weak rule of law do.

Lack of Understanding of Global and European Trends

The Western Balkans remain focused on regional political disputes (often involving some neighboring EU member states), without fully grasping the effects of the profound changes in the European and global security landscape, and how easily those challenges could spill over into the region. The nature of war has changed dramatically, with new weapons and strategies now dominating the battlefield. War is no longer waged only on the frontlines, and security threats are no longer confined by borders. As a participant from Bosnia and Herzegovina noted, cyberattacks on Albania by Iran have also had an impact on his country. Foreign threats are now quieter and more pervasive—cyberattacks, energy shocks, disinformation—but the region is surrounded by NATO and the EU. The bigger danger comes from inside.

Instead of focusing on local skirmishes and exploiting certain challenges for their own political ends, regional leaders should concentrate more on what they can contribute to Europe. The

region should shift from asking for help to offering it. One of the key needs is stability in the region, which would serve as a helping hand to the EU. Secondly, the leaders should pay closer attention to EU initiatives on security and defense, particularly Readiness 2030, and explore ways to participate and contribute. For example, both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina possess significant capacity for arms and ammunition production, which could be leveraged to support the EU. Some participants noted that the fact that the Western Balkan countries purchase weapons from NATO members is evidence that any real conflict between them is highly unlikely.

A participant suggested that if there is no regional unity on these issues, there could be coalitions of the willing that would work with the EU and partner countries on certain matters such as migration, cybersecurity, and other shared challenges. Many agreed that this “coalition of the willing” model is more realistic and practical than waiting for all six countries to act together. Fragile politics and prevailing short-term interests make achieving full unity of the six unlikely at this stage.

EU Path as the Region’s Anchor

EU integration remains key for the Western Balkans, as it continues to be the main driver of crucial processes in the region. Many participants stressed that the prolonged and uncertain nature of the EU integration process is one of the main causes of the current situation in the Western Balkans. Some remarked that region has grown “addicted” to EU attention—and frustrated when Brussels turns its focus to Ukraine and Moldova. A participant from Bosnia and Herzegovina warned that if we fail to integrate the region into the EU, “people will leave, but someone else will come here.” Others also stressed that the EU must demonstrate that it is able to stabilize and integrate its immediate neighborhood; otherwise, it risks losing relevance on the world stage.

Participants expressed satisfaction with the current progress of Montenegro and Albania as forerunners in the integration process, but emphasized that the rest of the region should not be neglected. Many asked: What happens after Albania and Montenegro join? Will the others be left behind or pulled forward? Some noted the persistent lack of trust between the EU and the Western Balkans. In addition to the current merit-based process, there should also be a strong political focus and a clear political decision to move forward with the remaining countries in some form.

Participants also pointed to the EU’s internal divisions and the rise of populism—factors that limit its ability to act as one. “Blocking North Macedonia or not recognizing Kosovo,” one participant said, “only deepens instability.” Some suggested a reform of the accession process to include a stronger political dimension. A strong focus should also be placed on development and on the inclusion of candidate countries in EU mechanisms, including the Schengen Area. This would further encourage the Western Balkan states’ sense of ownership and motivation to contribute to European security.

Regional Organizations and the Berlin Process: Time for Reassessment

Regional initiatives established over the past 30 years have greatly contributed to maintaining peace and building trust in the region. Some of them, such as regional arms control, focus

specifically on security. However, one participant stressed that there is a visible decline in the functionality of these organizations. A participant from Kosovo noted a series of setbacks affecting more than 12 regional initiatives.

Thus, existing tools and mechanisms could be better utilized in this regard. The Berlin Process should also play an instrumental role in bringing security topics to the forefront, reassessing these organizations, and providing new impetus to their functionality. Participants said that CRM and EU Growth Plan should not be seen solely as economic projects—they can also help close security gaps. Strengthening cooperation in the security area should build on a narrative of positive examples—such as economic cooperation and the de facto free flow of workers in some areas—outlined the participant from Montenegro.

One participant emphasized that bilateral issues and peace processes in the Western Balkans must be resolved in order to achieve success in regional security cooperation.

A group of participants suggested establishing a security coordination mechanism modeled on a similar process that exists between Croatia, Italy, Slovenia, and Austria. It should be created under the auspices of the Berlin Process and comprised of ministers of defense/security and internal affairs. It should also be linked with the EU Commissioner for the Home Affairs/Migration and Internal Security and meet regularly. The aim should be to produce practical outcomes and approaches that can be translated into action on various issues—most prominently cooperation in cases of natural disasters, migration, and cybersecurity. The participants agreed that the region has moved from chaos to stability. The next step is to make it a source of stability for others.

Conclusion

The roundtable in Tirana precisely identified the key challenges that obstruct the will for deeper security cooperation in the region. Without resolving outstanding bilateral issues and completing ongoing peace processes in the region, there will always be room for obstructing cooperation. The key to revamping existing regional security mechanisms and establishing deeper cooperation is closely connected with the success of the EU negotiation process.

Leaders should recognize their own responsibility and start seeing the region not just as a security consumer but also as a contributor. To be a “producer of security” means helping EU manage its wider crises, rather than adding to them. The Western Balkans can be part of the solution if it chooses to act accordingly. Such engagement would have a positive impact on the EU integration process and contribute to the resilience of the region and individual countries, as well as strengthen security cooperation in the Western Balkans.

Participants

English Alphabetical Order

Nicholas Abbott, Ambassador of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to Albania

Josip Brkic, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina; Croat Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Matthias Conrad, Deputy Head, Western Balkans Division, Federal Foreign Office, Germany

Igor Crnadak, Member of Parliament of Republika Srpska, Party of Democratic Progress; Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Shpetim Gashi, Vice President, Council for Inclusive Governance

Blerina Gjylameti, Member of Parliament of Albania, Socialist Party of Albania

Nevena Jovanovic, State Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia

Mimoza Kusari Lila, Member of Parliament of Kosovo; President, Alternativa

Jeta Loshaj, Associate, Council for Inclusive Governance

Agon Maliqi, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council

Damir Masic, Member of Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Social Democratic Party

Marina Mijatovic, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Green Left Front

Engjellushe Morina, Senior Policy Fellow, European Council on Foreign Relations

Igor Novakovic, Senior Associate, Council for Inclusive Governance

Ivan Otovic, Speaker, Assembly of Herzeg Novi, New Serb Democracy (Montenegro)

Ivana Penava, Senior Advisor, Croat Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Slavjanka Petrovska, Member of Parliament of North Macedonia, Social Democratic Union of Macedonia; Former Minister of Defense of North Macedonia,

Haris Plakalo, Secretary General, European Movement; Party of Democratic Action (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Sergej Popov, Member of Parliament of North Macedonia, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity

Alex Roinishvili Grigorev, President, Council for Inclusive Governance

Branko Ruzic, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Socialist Party of Serbia; Former First Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia

Marko Savkovic, Senior Adviser, International and Security Affairs Center (Serbia)

Besnik Tahiri, Vice President, Alliance for the Future of Kosovo; Former First Deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo

Ivan Vukovic, Member of Parliament of Montenegro, Democratic Party of Socialists

Besart Xhaferi, Member of Parliament of Albania, Democratic Party of Albania

Jeton Zulfaj, Political Adviser to Acting Prime Minister of Kosovo; Self-Determination Movement