

Advancing EU Integration: Lessons from Frontrunners

Introduction

On April 20, 2026, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) convened a regional roundtable in Podgorica, Montenegro. The discussion brought together senior party and government officials from the six Western Balkan countries, alongside senior EU diplomats and experts to assess progress of the EU accession “frontrunners.” Participants also examined the implications of their potential accession for the rest of the region, as well as the current state of regional cooperation under the framework of the EU Growth Plan and the broader Berlin Process agenda. The roundtable was organized as part of a CIG regional project supported by the German Federal Foreign Office (AA).

The discussion focused on several key questions: What lessons can be drawn from the frontrunners’ experience, and what challenges remain? How relevant are these lessons for countries lagging in the accession process? And how might regional cooperation, in particular within the Berlin Process, evolve following the potential accession of one or two frontrunners?

This report summarizes the main themes and insights from the discussion, presenting key takeaways, conclusions, and recommendations. These do not necessarily represent a consensus view or reflect the positions of CIG or AA. The roundtable was held under the Chatham House Rule. The report was prepared by Igor Novakovic, CIG Senior Adviser.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A substantial number of conclusions and recommendations emerged from the discussion:

- The acceleration of the EU integration process and the successful conclusion of negotiations with Montenegro (and possibly Albania) send a clear signal that claims the EU is not open to the Western Balkans are unfounded.
- Montenegro’s prospective accession is crucial for the region, as it would demonstrate that the merit-based accession process is credible and that the EU genuinely committed to enlargement.
- A broad national consensus, especially among key political parties, is essential for a successful EU accession process, alongside the implementation of sustained and accelerated reforms. Montenegro’s recent experience illustrates this, and similar mechanisms should be developed elsewhere in the region.

- Such national consensus must be accompanied by continuous public debate and proactive communication on the merits of EU integration to the wider public.
- EU enlargement is primarily an internal process, requiring deep domestic reforms and systemic transformation. The quality and credibility of these efforts are crucial in securing the confidence of EU Member States.
- While enlargement remains inherently political, the merit-based dimension of negotiations must be preserved. Ultimately, the accession decisions are political, but they must be grounded in credible progress.
- In Montenegro's case, priority should be given to completing the technical aspects of negotiations, while anticipating potential political challenges from the Member States. Once the technical process is completed, delaying accession becomes more difficult.
- Rules regarding vetoes and the integration of new Member States should be clarified without delay. Prolonged ambiguity—including debates on gradual accession—risks undermining the credibility of the process.
- A loss of EU credibility is a serious concern, as it is exploited by regional actors and external powers seeking to slow down efforts.
- The EU and key Member States must proactively address bilateral blockages by individual Member States, as illustrated by the Bulgaria-North Macedonia case. Such blockages undermine the enlargement process. A clear and effective strategy on how to handle such cases needs to be adopted as the current approach has proven inadequate.
- Implementation of the Growth Plan demonstrates regional governments' commitment to cooperation with the EU and can serve as a practical indicator of readiness to advance in the integration process.
- Ongoing negotiations with Montenegro and the drafting of the accession treaty will likely define a template for future enlargements. Therefore, the importance of the EU–Montenegro negotiations is extremely high for other candidate countries.
- Being overly optimistic about certain candidates and their reforms can be counterproductive to a merit-based process. If governments violate the fundamental principles of EU integration or fail to meet standards, they should not be rewarded. Mixed messages weaken public support for enlargement and encourage transactional political behavior.
- EU enlargement also carries a strong geopolitical dimension. The EU should remain attentive to competing external influences and prioritize the integration of the Western Balkans as a matter of strategic importance.
- The proliferation of regional initiatives calls for rationalization. Consolidating these mechanisms under a single coordinating framework (distinct from the Berlin Process) could improve coherence, efficiency, and strategic direction.
- The Berlin Process should continue, but with a sharper focus. Prioritizing one or two key deliverables annually, clearly communicated to the public, and emphasizing implementation would enhance its credibility and impact. If the Berlin Process delivers on a regular basis on concrete issues, it would send a different signal about the prospects of the regional integration.
- Consideration should be given to reforming decision-making within the Berlin Process. Moving from full consensus to a “consensus minus one or two” model could enable willing countries to advance integration and reduce persistent blockages by those skeptical about greater cooperation.

Key Takeaways from the Discussion

A National Consensus is Essential for Success

The case of Montenegro is instructive for all candidate countries. Podgorica has successfully capitalized on renewed EU interest in enlargement and built a broad political consensus that concluding negotiations is a key national priority. This effort has been reinforced by official narratives and sustained public support, with more than 70% backing EU integration. However, while the basis for national consensus existed, maintaining the pace of reforms and consistent political support has proven challenging.

Currently, the political landscape is fragmented, with ten parties in the government and ten in opposition. Nevertheless, key actors have demonstrated political maturity by supporting crucial rule-of-law reforms. Notably, there have been no significant attempts to instrumentalize the reform process or EU negotiations for short-term political gain.

At the same time, consensus does not imply the absence of disagreement. Ongoing disputes over specific legislative initiatives, including the current law under debate, illustrate that important political and institutional challenges persist. These tensions highlight the need to manage disagreements constructively, ensuring that they do not undermine the broader strategic objective of EU accession.

Montenegro is now focused on completing negotiations and drafting the accession treaty. There is a clear understanding among the political actors that the process is ultimately political and that final decisions rest with EU Member States. However, there is also a shared view that these challenges will be easier to address once the technical aspects of the process are finalized.

A participant from Montenegro highlighted several short-term challenges arising from the EU integration process. In particular, the upcoming abolition of visa-free regimes could have a significant impact on Montenegro's economy, given that tourism accounts for approximately a third of its economy and that the majority of foreign visitors originate from countries not on the Schengen "white list."

To mitigate these risks, both Montenegro and the EU should adopt a proactive approach. This could include exploring transitional arrangements, targeted visa facilitation measures for key tourist markets, and coordinated support to help the sector adjust. Ensuring policy coherence between enlargement and economic sustainability will be critical to avoiding unintended negative impacts on Montenegro's growth and public support for EU integration.

As noted by a participant from North Macedonia, this approach should serve as a model for other countries in the region. They should develop internal mechanisms to build consensus and define clear and actionable reform agendas. In addition, governments should adopt transparent communication strategies to explain reforms and necessary political steps to the public. On the EU side, Montenegro's integration should be treated not merely as a promise, but as an opportunity to strengthen the EU's credibility and standing in the region.

Political Challenges and Inconsistent Messaging

A central challenge remains the lack of clarity on key political aspects of future enlargement. Ongoing EU debates on veto rights and safeguard mechanisms in accession treaties risk sending the wrong signals and undermining the perception that the process is, above all, merit-based. This ambiguity also has domestic repercussions, as some regional leaders use it to justify slowing or obstructing reforms.

In several cases, elites in the region have limited interest in advancing rule-of-law reforms, as these may threaten their own political or economic interests. At the same time, the perceived distance of tangible political rewards makes it difficult for them to build public support for the reform agenda and absorb the associated political risk. As one participant noted, Albania, until recently considered a frontrunner, illustrates this dynamic, as its progress appears to have stalled due to inability to advance key rule-of-law decisions.

A participant from Serbia highlighted inconsistencies in messaging between Brussels and some EU Member State capitals, describing the overall approach as contradictory and ultimately damaging to EU interests. As the participant emphasized, “the moment calls for honesty, whatever that truth may be.” Clarity and honesty are essential to maintain credibility.

Changes Shaped by the War in Ukraine

The enlargement process, although seemingly unchanged at first glance, has evolved significantly following Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2022. Core elements, such as the Copenhagen Criteria, remain intact, but the political dimension and broader strategic considerations have become more pronounced.

As one participant noted, the current drafting of the accession treaty with Montenegro is of critical importance, as it will likely serve as a blueprint for all future enlargements. The treaty will need to reflect not only existing standards but also emerging political and strategic considerations, making its drafting both complex and highly politically consequential.

Montenegro’s Success is Critical for the Region

Several participants stressed the importance for the other countries in the region to support Montenegro’s accession process, which one described as “the most important historical process of the last decade in the region.” A participant from Serbia warned that if this opportunity is missed, the EU could face an entirely new set of challenges. Should the EU fail to deliver, other actors are likely to increase their involvement, a trend already visible through Russian and Chinese influence, among others. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, the United States has at times pursued approaches that diverge from those of the EU, further complicating the strategic landscape.

Several participants also referred to the case of North Macedonia, which is frequently used by populist actors and aligned media as evidence that EU membership is not truly attainable. If Montenegro’s accession were to stall or fail, it would significantly damage the EU’s credibility and image in the region.

At the same time, Montenegro’s eventual accession is unlikely to generate resentment in neighboring countries. Rather, it may create a sense of missed opportunity. As one participant noted, this could in turn help increase internal pressure for reforms and renewed progress along the EU integration path.

The Future of Regional Cooperation

The eventual accession of one or more frontrunners will raise important questions about the future of regional cooperation. One key concern relates to the distribution of benefits, as regional cooperation and integration have often been perceived as favoring larger economies, particularly Serbia and, to some extent, Albania. This perception has, at times, generated reservations among the other countries in the region.

At present, there are 34 different regional cooperation processes, including the Berlin Process. Several participants emphasized the urgent need for rationalization. One proposal envisaged the creation of a “holding structure” for regional initiatives that would consolidate their portfolios and provide more effective coordination. However, it was emphasized that such a structure should not operate under the umbrella of the Berlin Process, which is primarily intended as a forum for political dialogue and agreement-building. Instead, the Berlin Process should serve as platform for generating new breakthroughs and political momentum that can guide and support a new (or restructured) umbrella framework for existing regional organizations and initiatives. Improved coordination could also enhance accountability in cases of delays or blockages.

The Berlin Process itself should retain its political character but become more focused and result oriented. In practical terms, this would require narrowing its annual agenda to a limited number of key priority issues and placing greater emphasis on the implementation of agreed commitments. Such an approach would make it easier to communicate tangible results and benefits to citizens. As one participant from North Macedonia noted, it is preferable to achieve one visible success each year than to pursue multiple overly ambitious goals without clear outcomes. Current priority areas mentioned identified include trade, mobility, and the recognition of professional qualifications.

Finally, one participant suggested reforming the implementation approach itself. Instead of requiring full consensus, initiatives could proceed under a “consensus minus one or two” model, allowing progress in advancing cooperation even when disagreements persist.

Participants

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David Hudson, Senior Expert, DG ENEST, European Commission

Pavle Jankovic, Head of the Political Department, Regional Cooperation Council

Belind Kellici, Member of Parliament of Albania; Member, Presidency, Democratic Party

Simonida Kordic, Minister for Tourism of Montenegro, Member, Presidency, New Serbian Democracy

Jeta Loshaj, Senior Associate, Council for Inclusive Governance

Agon Maliqi, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council

Bojan Marichikj, Chairman, Central Election Commission, North Macedonia; Former First Deputy Prime Minister of North Macedonia

Jovana Marovic, Former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of European Affairs of Montenegro; Member, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group

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Bojana Selakovic, Coordinator, National Convention on the EU (Serbia)

Bojan Stojanoski, Member of Parliament of North Macedonia; Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity

Besnik Tahiri, Member of Parliament of Kosovo; Vice President, Alliance for the Future of Kosovo; former Deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo

Rene Troccaz, Special Envoy for the Western Balkans, Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs of France

Marko Vujacic, International Secretary, Green Left Front, Serbia

Ivan Vukovic, Member of Parliament of Montenegro; Vice President, Democratic Party of Socialists