

# From Neighbors to Partners

## Introduction

On May 13-14, 2025, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) convened a regional roundtable in Budva, Montenegro. The event brought together senior politicians from the six Western Balkan countries to discuss how to advance regional cooperation, how it can help their countries move closer to the European Union, improve life at home, and build better relations with neighbors.

The meeting came at a time of uncertain EU integration prospects, democratic and economic setbacks at home, and strained relations between neighbors. Participants reflected on why progress has stalled and how both national efforts and regional initiatives, like the Berlin Process and the Growth Plan, can play a stronger role. The message was clear: The region can move forward only if governments show political will, take real action, and assume greater responsibility for reforms. Participants shared practical ideas to strengthen regional cooperation, rebuild trust, and deliver results that matter to people. They agreed that stronger regional ties are not only good for the economy and reconciliation—they are also key to joining the EU and building a more peaceful region.

The roundtable was held under the Chatham House Rule and was supported by the German Federal Foreign Office. The report was prepared by Jeta Loshaj, CIG's Associate in Kosovo. An annex with insights shared by the participants ahead of the meeting is included.

## Key takeaways

### Enlargement fatigue and eroding credibility of EU integration

A prevailing sentiment throughout the roundtable was a growing sense of enlargement fatigue. Many participants pointed to the lack of progress since Croatia's accession in 2013 and voiced concern about the EU's increasingly ambiguous approach to the Western Balkans. The inconsistent application of conditionality and absence of clear timelines are eroding public trust. North Macedonia was frequently cited as a case of disillusionment—having fulfilled the Prespa Agreement, it still faces delays in opening EU negotiations due to the Bulgarian veto. Others argued that EU skepticism within the Union itself is rising, and party politics increasingly shape the pace of enlargement. Participants insisted that the EU must define a timeframe for accession and stop “hiding behind strategic documents and evolving methodologies.” As one participant stated, “The region is no longer impressed by small steps; we need real deliverables.”

## **Berlin Process at a crossroads**

Participants said the Berlin Process needs revitalization. Many described it as overly technocratic and disconnected from political realities. Still, they acknowledged its potential as a platform for practical cooperation. Key recommendations included advancing regional mobility agreements, ensuring mutual recognition of diplomas and qualifications, and fast-tracking the implementation of green lanes to facilitate trade. A regional Schengen-style arrangement also gained support. Others noted that the Berlin Process reflects the EU's current hesitation on enlargement—offering dialogue, but not necessarily progress. One participant put it bluntly: “Talk less, do more.” A number of participants expressed skepticism about the Berlin Process's long-term impact unless accompanied by stronger political will, more funding, and real ownership by the region. A participant suggested selecting every year a big issue to be the annual focus of the Berlin Process, call that year after such an issue, and deliver on it.

## **Uncertainty around gradual integration**

The concept of gradual integration into core EU structure—like the Single Market and the Schengen zone—was addressed. While recognized as a pragmatic interim step, many warned gradual integration should not become a substitute for full membership. A participant explained that the Growth Plan and other instruments are not replacements for enlargement, but tools to support it. Another participant stressed that “ninety percent of the EU accession depends on the EU, ten percent on us.” Without a time-bound roadmap or stronger EU commitment, gradual integration risks becoming a “permanent waiting room.” Participants called on the EU to clarify what gradual integration entails and how it fits into the formal accession framework. Others noted that the EU's internal reforms should proceed in parallel with reform in the Western Balkans, not delay it. A few expressed concerns that Moldova's and Ukraine's inclusion in the next round of enlargement could complicate the process and further sideline the Western Balkans. Some suggested quantifying the cost of not integrating the region into the EU, both for the region and for the EU.

## **The role of external actors and geopolitical relevance**

In light of the emerging “geopolitical recession,” participants highlighted the rising influence of Russia, China, and Turkey in the region—often stepping in where the EU and the US appear disengaged. They are expanding influence through infrastructure, loans, and strategic projects. Several warned of the increasing appeal of these actors' business model, which appears faster and less conditional. The sense that the West is “absent” was strong. Especially the decline of American focus was described as creating a strategic vacuum. The UK was praised for its renewed engagement, especially through its 2025 chairmanship of the Berlin Process. Some advocated for a strategic “triangle of influence,” in which the EU—led by Germany—provides frameworks, the US offers pressure and guarantees, and the UK delivers pragmatic facilitation. The UK's support for the Western Balkans' EU integration was viewed as critical contribution to European security.

## **Economic integration and the Common Regional Market (CRM)**

The CRM remains a cornerstone of economic cooperation in the Western Balkans, but implementation gaps persist and impact remains uneven. Some noted that integration with the EU market has advanced more than integration within the region. Participants called for urgent steps to enhance mobility, remove trade barriers, and harmonize qualifications and work permits, and green lanes to reduce barriers and foster competitiveness. Regional cooperation, some noted, often

feels more complex than EU accession due to lingering mistrust and uneven commitments. Nonetheless, practical steps—such as digital integration, joint infrastructure projects, and facilitating of labor mobility—were seen as essential for aligning the region economically with the EU. Concerns were raised that the region often hesitates to integrate with neighbors of similar development level while racing to connect with the rich EU. Others warned that without strong rule of law, regional economic integration alone will not be sustainable. CEFTA and the Regional Cooperation Council were seen as underutilized mechanisms that should play a greater role in supporting labor and trade mobility. Many called for a clear assessment of CRM’s impact on local economies, especially for Kosovo.

### **Resolution of bilateral disputes through constructive dialogue**

Bilateral disputes remain the most pressing obstacles to lasting stability and regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. Participants stressed the need for renewed political will and structured engagement to resolve key issues, particularly between Serbia and Kosovo, and in and around Bosnia and Herzegovina. Governments were encouraged to engage in structured, good-faith dialogue, supported by impartial mediation and international facilitation where needed. Existing platforms, such as the EU-facilitated dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, should be strengthened and shielded from domestic political interference. Where needed, new mechanisms could be created to help address ongoing tensions in and around Bosnia and Herzegovina. Durable solutions should be based on international law, regional agreements, and the principles of mutual recognition and cooperation. As some note, Albania and Montenegro are ahead because they resolved their neighborly disputes, while North Macedonia was “stabbed in the back.”

### **Alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy**

Participants emphasized that alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy is a key sign of a serious and strategic commitment to EU integration. Although all Western Balkan countries have pledged to gradually align with EU foreign policy, major gaps remain, especially in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where positions have diverged significantly, particularly on sanctions. Participants recommended that governments improve foreign policy coordination, invest in institutional capacity, and clearly communicate the benefits of alignment to public. In turn, the EU should provide clearer guidance and more targeted support, especially on politically sensitive matters. Greater alignment will enhance the region’s credibility as future EU members and show a shared commitment to Europe’s security, values, and global influence. Some noted that EU’s credibility required consistency and that selective enforcement only undermined conditionality. A few voices also suggested that the EU’s next budget should more directly support the enlargement process.

### **Rule of law, corruption, and institutional weakness**

A consistent theme was the need to strengthen the rule of law and accountability. The rule of law remains a defining barrier to accession. Concerns were raised about democratic backsliding, political interference in the judiciary, and media capture. One participant noted: “In 2023, Bosnia and Herzegovina had not a single indictment for high-level corruption, while Ukraine had over eighty—and they are at war.” Participants urged the EU to adopt a more transparent and firm approach to monitoring reforms, including clear benchmarks, performance-based assessments, and consequences. Many agreed that the lack of progress on rule of law reforms remains a core reason for the region’s stalled integration. Several argued that the EU should be more vocal about

democratic deficiencies and more engaged in evaluating reform outcomes. They suggested that the EU must openly call out political leaders and stop rewarding rhetoric compliance.

### **Bringing integration closer to citizens**

Participants noted a growing disconnect between high-level politics and citizens' daily lives. They proposed to include local governments, increase transparency of EU-funded projects, and develop better communication strategies to explain the benefits of EU integration. As one participant pointed out, "Two-thirds of the EU *acquis* is implemented at the local level, yet these actors are rarely engaged or informed." There was broad agreement that building visibility and ownership at the community level are crucial to restoring public trust. One participant warned that unless citizens see the value, support for integration will erode. Some suggested involving youth, NGOs, and local assemblies more systematically. One of the most visible ways of bringing integration closer to citizens would be establishing paper-free travel within the region with a goal of incorporating the region into EU's own Schengen Area.

### **Reframing the narrative and political will**

Participants emphasized the need to reframe the narrative around EU accession. Rather than treating it as an abstract goal, it should be seen as a path to security, prosperity, and dignity. "The end is not accession," a participant said. "The end is what accession delivers." Many called for more honesty from the EU: "No more strategies, no more documents, tell us what you are really thinking." Some voiced concern that the momentum has been lost, and while Albania and Montenegro seem to have a path, others risk becoming "frozen" in their EU path. Participants urged the EU to speak plainly about what works and what does not, and for regional leaders to abandon performative action. Both sides must act now: the EU must clarify its commitment, and the region's governments must deliver.

## **Conclusion**

The Budva roundtable was both a moment to reflect and a call to move forward. It showed deep frustration with how slowly things are changing—especially on EU integration, broken promises, and the gap between what leaders say and what they do. Still, participants made it clear they have not given up. Many believe the Western Balkans can still make progress if both the EU and the region take real steps.

Participants urged both the EU and regional leaders to be more honest, focused, and brave. The EU should stop hiding behind long documents and vague language. Instead, it should set clear timeliness, provide more funding, and apply its standards fairly. While EU internal reforms matter, they should not be used as an excuse to delay progress in the Western Balkans. At the same time, leaders in the region must stop blaming others and take responsibility for making real reforms.

Many said the Berlin Process and the Growth Plan can help—but only if they become more practical, better funded, and focused on real outcomes. Just talking about mobility and infrastructure is not enough. These efforts must be tied to rule of law, stronger institutions, and benefits for ordinary people.

The future of the region depends on action—from both Brussels and the Western Balkans. If the EU sees enlargement as a real goal, it must act like it. And if the Western Balkans wants to join, they must act like it too. There is no more time for empty promises. With stronger leadership and real commitment, the Western Balkans can still find their place in Europe—not as a forgotten corner, but as a part of its peace, security, and prosperity.

## ANNEX

### Participants' Insights Ahead of Budva Roundtable

#### 1. Priority areas for regional cooperation (2025–2026)

- Full implementation of the Growth Plan, with clear benchmarks and comparative tracking of EU accession progress.
- Further advancing the Common Regional Market as a stepping stone to the EU Single Market.
- Cross-border infrastructure and energy interconnectors to improve connectivity and energy security.
- Mutual recognition of diplomas, professional qualifications, and technical standards.
- Alignment of education standards and implementation of mobility agreements under the Berlin Process.
- Digital transformation, including the introduction of digital IDs and expansion of Green Lanes within the region and with the EU.
- Liberalization of work permits to improve labor mobility across the region.
- Strengthening democratic institutions, promoting rule of law, and intensifying anti-corruption efforts.
- Enhancing dialogue and political coordination through multilateral forums.
- Resolution of bilateral issues that block implementation of regional agreements (e.g., diploma recognition, visa-free travel between Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina).

#### 2. Most beneficial areas by country

- Advancing the Common Regional Market to help close the economic gap with the EU.
- Improving infrastructure and education for long-term growth.
- Gradual integration into key EU Single Market policies.
- Liberalized work permits and recognition of qualification to reduce brain drain and enhance mobility.
- Expansion of Green Lanes and adoption of SEPA (Single Europe Payments Area) to streamline trade and financial flows.
- Full implementation of regional mobility agreements—especially ID-based travel, diploma recognition, and professional qualifications—to strengthen regional economic ties.

---

#### 3. Political obstacles to regional cooperation and recommended measures

##### Key obstacles:

- Unresolved political disputes, particularly between Kosovo and Serbia.
- Institutional dysfunction and tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- Ongoing historical revisionism and weak progress on reconciliation.
- Inconsistent alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy.
- Rising political instability, nationalism, and foreign interferences.

**Proposed measures:**

- Defining clear, measurable benchmarks linked to EU accession.
- Providing tangible financial incentives through the next EU budget cycle.
- Holding regular regional summits with clear follow-up actions.
- Enhancing EU/US/Germany/UK coordination to resolve bilateral issues.
- Promoting rule of law, judicial reforms, and anti-corruption initiatives.
- Supporting reconciliation and countering nationalism through education and a shared European narrative.

---

**4. Political and technical support needed from the EU and the Berlin Process**

- A clear and credible EU accession timeline, with Germany in a leading role.
- Expanded cooperation on infrastructure and economic development through the Growth Plan.
- Gradual integration into the EU single market, especially in energy, transport, and defense.
- Timely follow-through by EU member states on key legal and policy steps (e.g., Green Lanes, roaming).
- Institutionalizing annual regional summits, with active participation from parliaments and civil society.
- Stronger inclusion of Bosnia and Herzegovina in regional platforms like CEFTA and RCC.
- Making the EU accession process transparent, predictable, and citizen-oriented.
- Highlighting success stories from frontrunners as examples for the region.

# Participants

*English Alphabetical Order*

**Josip Brkic**, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croat Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina  
**Ditmir Bushati**, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Albania, Socialist Party of Albania  
**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  
**Jeta Loshaj**, Associate, Council for Inclusive Governance  
**Bojan Marichikj**, Secretary for International Cooperation, Social Democratic Union of Macedonia; Former Deputy Prime Minister of North Macedonia  
**Jovana Marovic**, Former Deputy Prime Minister and European Affairs Minister of Montenegro  
**Damir Masic**, Member of Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Social Democratic Party  
**William Middleton**, Berlin Process Sherpa, Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, United Kingdom  
**Tanja Miscevic**, Former Minister of European Integration of Serbia; Former Deputy Secretary General, Regional Cooperation Council  
**Besian Mustafa**, Member of Parliament of Kosovo, Democratic League of Kosovo  
**Igor Novakovic**, Senior Associate, Council for Inclusive Governance  
**Ivan Otovic**, Speaker of the Assembly of Herceg Novi, New Serb Democracy  
**Haris Plakalo**, Secretary General, European Movement; Party of Democratic Action (Bosnia and Herzegovina)  
**Milan Radin**, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Serbian Progressive Party  
**Niels von Redecker**, Head, Western Balkans Division, Federal Foreign Office, Germany  
**Alex Roinishvili Grigorev**, President, Council for Inclusive Governance  
**Branko Ruzic**, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Socialist Party of Serbia; Former Minister of European Integration of Serbia  
**Besnik Tahiri**, Vice-President of the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo, Former Deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo  
**Ivanka Vasilevska**, Member of Parliament of North Macedonia, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity  
**Dobrica Veselinovic**, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Green Left Front  
**Ivan Vukovic**, Member of Parliament of Montenegro, Democratic Party of Socialists