



THE FUTURE OF WESTERN BALKANS REGIONAL COOPERATION

FROM PROLIFERATION TO PRINCIPLE

ABSTRACT

Three decades of regional cooperation building in the Western Balkans have produced more than 30 active frameworks, yet implementation consistently lags behind formal commitments. This policy brief argues that the region no longer moves as a bloc: a pattern of reform-willing “national champions” has emerged alongside countries with far less appetite for change. EU accession operates bilaterally, country by country, cluster by cluster, while regional cooperation operates collectively, with commitments made jointly but implementation left to national prerogatives and no equivalent enforcement mechanism. Where the two logics conflict, bilateral progress wins, and intra-regional disputes such as Kosovo’s exclusion from full membership in several regional bodies further erode the assumption of a coherent six-country unit.

The policy brief’s central argument is that gradual integration, not additional frameworks, should become the organising principle of regional cooperation. The proposed model is a two-track architecture: a baseline track open to all six, covering genuinely shared regional public goods (energy interconnection, environmental protection, cross-border mobility, disaster management); and a differentiated track, offering accelerated EU access calibrated strictly to *acquis* alignment and reform performance, not to participation in regional structures.



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Key messages

- The Western Balkans has accumulated over 30 active regional frameworks. What is increasingly clear, however, is that the region does not move as a region. Despite the institutional architecture built around collective progress, what has emerged is a pattern of national champions; countries ready and willing to advance, alongside others with far less appetite for reform. The region remains cooperation-rich and reform-poor.
- Regional frameworks have operated on the assumption that the Western Balkans moves as a bloc; this assumption no longer holds. Continuing to structure cooperation around WB6 as a unit rewards those with little appetite for reform and holds back national champions ready to advance. Differentiated integration must become the organising principle of regional cooperation – and the necessary response to the pattern that has emerged. The 2020 revised enlargement methodology already provides tools to reflect different speeds and different levels of commitment. Regional cooperation frameworks should be structured on the same logic: open to all, but delivering more to those who deliver reform.
- The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans embeds a critical regional conditionality: Common Regional Market (CRM) delivery is an explicit precondition for EU single-market access and a driver of deeper economic integration. The European Commission should define specific, measurable CRM milestones linked to concrete single-market access rights, converting the Pillar 1-Pillar 2 linkage into a transparent, step-by-step pathway that countries and citizens can see and track.

- The accession timeline is outpacing the regional architecture. Montenegro and Albania are on the path to conclude accession talks by 2028, yet there is no clarity on what regional cooperation will look like once individual countries accede. This conversation needs to start now, well before the first accession.

Introduction

The Western Balkans has been promised EU membership for over two decades. At the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, the EU gave the region its clearest commitment: accession was not a question of if, but when. To encourage cooperation among these countries, the EU embedded regional cooperation as a pillar of its accession process. That promise generated a wave of regional cooperation frameworks, some of which are legally grounded, some politically driven, but almost all are designed to prepare the six Western Balkans (WB6) countries for membership and to embed cooperation as a habit before accession. Today, only Croatia has joined the EU. The frameworks, however, have proliferated.

Three decades of cooperation-building have produced a landscape of over 30 active frameworks, yet the formal commitments those initiatives generate consistently outpace their delivery. They have been designed as stepping stones, but in many cases, they have become destinations, platforms for political visibility rather than instruments of transformation. Some, such as the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), the Energy Community, the Regional School of Public Administration and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, have delivered real results and produced durable outputs because they embedded commitments in institutional obligations rather

than declarations. But the overall architecture has expanded without a coherent logic of rationalisation, sometimes generating overlap and even duplication. The original rationale – cooperation as preparation for membership – has given way to cooperation as performance.

This policy brief argues that restoring the original purpose requires more than adding new instruments. It requires a different organising principle embedded in the gradual integration approach. Rather than treating regional cooperation as a uniform obligation for all six, the EU should use the instruments it has already developed – gradual integration, phasing-in and accelerated integration, embedded in the 2020 new enlargement methodology¹ and the Growth Plan's² architecture – as a framework for rewarding reform-willing countries with deeper EU engagement. That way, regional cooperation becomes an incentive structure, not a queue managed at the pace of the most reluctant participant.

The architecture of regional cooperation: Three decades of proliferation

Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans has evolved through four phases, as documented in the 2024 CeSPI-OBCT report.³ The first wave, in the early 1990s, emerged from the broader post-Cold War push for “new regionalism”, and initiatives such as the Central European Initiative (1989) and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (1992) sought to build common frameworks as communist structures collapsed across the continent. The Yugoslav wars brought this regionalism to an abrupt halt. In the aftermath, priorities shifted to a post-conflict stabilisation and reconciliation, anchored by the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe (1999), while the Stabilisation and Association Process provided the founding institutional architecture. In 2008, the RCC eventually replaced the Stability Pact.

The Thessaloniki Summit (2003) marked the next turning point: the EU formalised membership prospects and made regional cooperation an explicit component of accession conditionality. In the decade to follow, legally grounded, sector-specific frameworks gradually extended EU rules to the region. The most notable ones are the Energy Community (2005), the Transport Community (2017) and CEFTA, which produced measurable harmonisation through rights, obligations and enforcement mechanisms.

The current phase was triggered by a specific political event: in 2014, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker announced that EU enlargement would be on hold for at least five years. Germany's response was the Berlin Process – an intergovernmental initiative designed to inject momentum into a stalled accession agenda, built around regional connectivity and the Common Regional Market (CRM), in which economic integration and gradual access to the EU single market have become the operative logic.

The gap between activity and impact is systemic and has been so for years. The RCC's Annual Report 2023-2024⁴ documents substantial activity across connectivity, the green agenda, the digital transition and human capital. However, the EU's annual reports tell a different story: implementation of agreed commitments consistently lags behind political declarations, and reform progress across clusters and chapters. Institutional delivery is also not keeping pace with public expectations: the RCC's 2025 Balkan Barometer records support for EU membership at a record high of 64%, with an equal share of respondents believing regional cooperation can improve economic conditions.

CRM has been one of the most crucial frameworks for regional cooperation; however, it has demonstrated key limits across all four freedoms it nominally serves – the free movement of goods, services, capital and people. To name a few: border waiting times have fallen but remain steep, still amounting to around 28 million hours annually,⁵ weighing on the movement of goods; the Single Euro Payments Area, which underpins the free flow of capital, has become operational in only four of the six economies, with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo still excluded; and the Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications, central to the free movement of people, remains stalled due to the Belgrade-Pristina impasse.⁶ Even genuine successes reveal the ceiling: the abolition of roaming charges now functions within the Western Balkans, yet remains unresolved at the EU-Western Balkans level.

Regional implementation is further strained by bilateral issues. Kosovo holds full membership in only a handful of regional organisations, and Pristina is the only WB6 capital without a regional secretariat. It also faces representation constraints stemming from non-recognition by other countries in the region, as well as the EU – constraints that affect programme eligibility and the basic mechanics of joint commitment. Together, these factors make the assumption of a coherent WB6 collective unit even harder to sustain in practice.⁷

Proliferation without reform traction: The bilateral-regional disconnect

The core problem is the disconnection between formal commitments and implementation. Regional organisations can coordinate, facilitate and report – but they cannot enforce. They depend on candidate countries to implement what has been agreed, which places an inherent limit on how rigorous monitoring can be and

how hard implementation can be pushed. The result is a structural softness built into the regional cooperation architecture itself.

The deeper problem is structural. The accession process operates on a bilateral logic – each country negotiates individually with the Commission, cluster by cluster, chapter by chapter – while regional cooperation operates on a collective logic, in which commitments are made jointly but implementation remains a national prerogative without equivalent enforcement. Where the two conflict, bilateral progress takes precedence. This tension is especially acute now, given the widening differences among the WB6 countries in pace and progress toward accession. This is not a design flaw that can be corrected at the margins; it is a tension built into the architecture itself.

This tension is compounded by real capacity constraints. National administrations are simultaneously managing accession negotiations, and Reform Agenda commitments under the Growth Plan. Amid these intensive and competing pressures, regional obligations rarely win.⁸ Intra-regional bilateral disputes add a further constraint, limiting the operational reach of frameworks that depend on consensus. The bilateral-regional disconnect is, in significant part, a product of these dynamics, not of organisational failure alone.

The Growth Plan: A regional conditionality already embedded but underused

The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans establishes a direct operational link between regional integration delivery and individual countries' access to EU single-market benefits, making it one of the most significant instruments for regional cooperation currently in place. Its architecture rests on four interlocking pillars:

enhanced integration with the EU single market (Pillar 1); boosting intra-regional integration through the CRM (Pillar 2); accelerating fundamental reforms (Pillar 3); and the Reform and Growth Facility's €6 billion financial envelope (Pillar 4).

The critical analytical point is the explicit conditionality that the Growth Plan establishes between Pillars 1 and 2. The Commission states unambiguously that completing CRM commitments is a necessary precondition for closer single-market integration, and that partners who impede CRM implementation cannot expect to benefit from single-market access.

The EU will provide substantial opportunities for integration in the EU's single market only if the region delivers on regional economic integration. Partners that are not fully committed to the Common Regional Market or impede the implementation of the Common Regional Market Action Plan cannot expect to benefit from the growth plan in terms of opportunities for single market integration.⁹

What is notable is that the EU has formally linked regional cooperation delivery, rather than just bilateral reform, to individual countries' access to deeper EU integration. CRM performance becomes a gateway to single-market benefits, not merely a political aspiration.¹⁰

The Growth Plan further specifies seven priority areas for single-market integration – free movement of goods, services and workers;

transport; energy; digital; financial services; and skills – each conditioned on the relevant country reaching the necessary level of *acquis* preparedness in that specific area. The principle is explicitly merit-based and sectoral: different countries can qualify at different times and for different areas. This anticipates, and in important respects already embodies, the differentiated integration logic.

The structural tension within the Growth Plan's own architecture, however, has yet to be resolved. Reform Agendas are negotiated individually between each Western Balkans country and the Commission, with no joint reform component and no mechanism that rewards cross-country cooperation. This sets the collective logic of Pillar 2, which treats the CRM as a shared obligation for all six, against the bilateral logic of Pillar 4, under which individualised Reform Agendas are calibrated to each country's domestic reform capacity. More consequentially, the conditionality the Growth Plan establishes, while formally clear, remains operationally underdeveloped. The Commission has not yet published specific, measurable CRM milestones, the completion of which would unlock specific single-market access rights, meaning the Pillar 1-Pillar 2 linkage exists as a principle but has not yet functioned as a pathway.

Gradual integration: An underused principle, applied differently

The EU's 2020 revised enlargement methodology gave greater operational detail to the concepts of gradual integration, phasing-in and accelerated integration as instruments for rewarding reform-willing candidate countries with early access to EU policies, programmes and market participation.¹¹ The underlying logic is straightforward: if a country demonstrates credible alignment with the *acquis* in a given area,

it should be able to access the corresponding EU benefits ahead of formal accession. This decouples the pace of integration from the pace of the slowest candidate and creates tangible, visible incentives for reform. These instruments have also been embedded in the negotiating frameworks of the candidate countries and referenced in the Growth Plan. Yet in practice, they remain under-operationalised, meaning that they are conceptually recognised but structurally underdeveloped.¹²

Applied to the architecture of regional cooperation, gradual integration addresses the structural failure identified: in a system where regional commitments are made collectively but implemented bilaterally, the pace of progress is set by the least willing reformers, and those who have earned deeper engagement are held back by the lowest common denominator logic of a WB6 collective unit. When the EU treats the Western Balkans as a collective unit, and thereby conditions progress on consensus among six countries at very different stages of reform, it structurally privileges the least willing reformers, imposing the cost of inaction on those most willing to act and draining precisely the reform incentive that the entire conditionality architecture is designed to create.¹³

The alternative is a two-track architecture that resolves both the lowest common denominator problem and the encapsulation concern that have been consistently raised by policy analysts¹⁴ and by Western Balkans officials themselves that regional cooperation frameworks risk becoming a permanent intermediate status rather than a stepping stone to full membership.¹⁵ A baseline track: applicable to all six countries, regardless of accession stage, that covers genuinely shared regional public goods – energy interconnection, environmental protection, cross-border mobility and disaster management. A differentiated integration track: grounded in EU annual report findings, CRM delivery performance and sectoral

acquis alignment that offers accelerated access to EU programmes, agencies, institutional participation and single-market rights to any Western Balkans country that meets the criteria. The critical design feature is that the criterion for accessing the differentiated track is EU acquis alignment, movement toward membership, not participation in a parallel regional structure, so that differentiated integration accelerates the journey for those willing to reform rather than providing a comfortable plateau for those who are not.

The Growth Plan's architecture already contains the embryo of this model, in the explicit conditionality it establishes between CRM delivery and single-market access under Pillars 1 and 2, and in the sectoral, merit-based logic through which different countries can qualify at different times for different areas of integration. What remains is the political intent to complete it, transforming differentiated integration from a supplement to bilateral accession tracks into the explicit organising principle of regional cooperation, and making the Pillar 1-Pillar 2 linkage operational through specific, published milestones rather than a general conditionality that exists as a principle but not yet as a pathway.

Regional cooperation when Montenegro and Albania become member states

Montenegro and Albania's expected accession would not be the first time the regional cooperation architecture in the Western Balkans has had to absorb a departure. Romania and Bulgaria left the Stability Pact framework on their 2007 accession, and Croatia followed in July 2013, each exit narrowing the geographic scope of "regional cooperation" without resolving the functional interdependencies that outlast formal membership.¹⁶ The same pattern would apply here, shrinking the WB6 format to four while leaving several cross-border issues untouched.

Trade is the most direct case. CEFTA's founding logic already builds in graduated exit: members leave upon EU accession, a rule exercised twice before.¹⁷ Montenegro and Albania would likely follow suit, with EU internal market rules superseding CEFTA membership. Because CEFTA trade makes up a substantial share of Montenegro's overall trade, the terms of its post-exit trading relationship with the remaining members carry more economic weight for Montenegro than for a country with lower regional trade dependence.¹⁸

Energy and infrastructure interdependence is largely indifferent to accession status. The Trans-Adriatic Pipeline transits Albania regardless of its EU status, and the Italy-Montenegro subsea cable, with its planned extension to southern Albania, embeds both countries in a grid architecture predating accession. The more interesting scenario is regulatory: post-accession, Montenegro and Albania could shift from being rule-takers to conduits transmitting EU energy standards into the remaining Energy Community membership, mirroring the intermediary role Croatia's accession created for it between net energy exporters and importers in the region.¹⁹

Justice, home affairs and security cooperation are least likely to be disrupted, since this architecture was built for mixed membership from the outset. The Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI), the Regional Anticorruption Initiative (RAI), the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC) and the regional police convention all already combine EU members, candidates and non-EU partners such as the US and Switzerland. Accession is therefore expected to leave this layer largely intact.

The political architecture, principally RCC, the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) and the Berlin Process WB6 format, faces the most direct adjustment pressure, following the precedent of reconstitution after Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia's departures. The more productive scenario, with direct relevance for a gradual integration agenda, is that Montenegro and Albania are repositioned as advocates and bridge actors for the remaining candidates within EU-level fora, converting institutional exit into continued engagement rather than disengagement.

Conclusion

Three decades of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans have produced a landscape that is heavy on institutions, light on reform. What has emerged is not a region moving collectively toward the EU, but a pattern of national champions ready to advance alongside others with far less appetite for reform. The architecture was designed for a bloc. More frameworks will not resolve this. The different logic this policy brief has argued for is gradual integration: a baseline track open to all six; and a performance-based track earned through delivery, not distributed by consensus.

The EU already possesses the instruments to apply that logic. Gradual integration, phasing-in and accelerated integration provide tools to reward reform performance rather than distribute benefits collectively. The Growth Plan ties CRM delivery directly to single-market access, establishing the most significant linkage yet between regional cooperation and EU integration. But that conditionality has yet to be made fully operational by defining specific, measurable CRM milestones linked to concrete single-market access rights.

Gradual integration is not a way of abandoning countries that fall behind. It is a way of refusing to let those countries hold back those that are moving forward. Continuing to structure regional cooperation around WB6 as a single unit rewards those with little appetite for reform and penalises the most committed. It is also a way forward for countries whose accession has stalled for reasons that have little to do with their own reform efforts – bilateral disputes, non-recognition or other political blockages beyond their control – offering them a route to deeper engagement on the merits even when the formal process is frozen. Every Western Balkans country can qualify for deeper engagement, but qualifying must be earned, not received as a collective entitlement calibrated to the slowest mover.

The next accessions are no longer a distant prospect. If Montenegro and Albania close their negotiations before the decade is out, the question becomes urgent: what becomes of regional cooperation once two members sit inside the EU and four remain outside? There is no answer yet. Building an architecture that keeps the remaining four on a European path – without severing them from the two that have crossed over – will take deliberate political choices, and those choices cannot wait.

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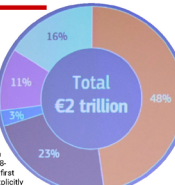
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FINANCING ENLARGEMENT VIA THE 2028-2034 MFF

ABSTRACT

This brief intends to explain how the European Commission's proposal for the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) addresses EU enlargement, which is once again a paramount concern following a decade of stagnation and in light of Russia's war in Ukraine, With Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia submitting EU membership applications, and amid growing awareness of the risk of destabilisation in the Western Balkans if the EU does not demonstrate a genuine commitment to enlargement, the 2028-2034 MFF marks a watershed moment. It is the first proposal for an EU multimodal budget to explicitly consider the pressure that will be placed on the EU's long-term budget by incorporating countries with weaker economies, incomplete reforms, and urgent reconstruction needs. This policy brief addresses three key issues: what funding is needed to enlargement; whether it is sufficient to meet the challenge; and whether the proposal adequately prepares the EU for the inclusion of new Member States.



Category	Percentage
Total	48%
Category 1	23%
Category 2	16%
Category 3	11%
Category 4	3%

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POSITIONS ON ENLARGEMENT OF THE 27

WHAT DO EU POLITICAL PARTIES THINK?

ABSTRACT

Enlargement perfectly illustrates the European Union's nature as a composite political space. Shaped by distinct historical trajectories, each EU member state responds to enlargement policy based on its own domestic experiences, perceived vulnerabilities and specific stakeholder dynamics. For this reason, European – the political families in Brussels – remain diverse groups that share general orientations but can also diverge significantly when sensitive issues arise.

As national political parties remain dominant actors in EU politics, this study examines their positions on enlargement across the 27 member states. Although enlargement is officially central to the Union's geopolitical strategy, this research reveals that it remains a low priority for national political parties, largely absent from electoral campaigns and party programmes. Furthermore, the prevailing continental consensus among mainstream parties around a merit-based approach often conceals significant divergences. This policy brief examines how party positions are influenced not only by ideology, but also by security concerns, historical and regional dynamics, institutional reforms debates and economic competition, particularly regarding agriculture and labour market.

Ultimately, the policy brief warns that as the current contest, enlargement's political pull has reduced to a mere transactional geopolitical tool and a step towards an intergovernmental Union, rather than being treated as a long-term investment in European security, democracy and prosperity.



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POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE EU AND THE CHALLENGES OF ENLARGEMENT

COUNTRY ANALYSIS

Luisa Chiodi, Federico Baccini, Francesco Brusa
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POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE EU AND THE CHALLENGES OF ENLARGEMENT



ABSTRACT

Today, enlargement policy is not a base for building electoral consent for any European party – quite the opposite. It is also a highly technical field where political propaganda can easily manipulate public opinion. Stirring fears around new races to the bottom in the sphere of democracy and labour relations around competition for scarce resources or migration is a strategy for gaining votes in most EU countries. Yet, given the EU member states' role in the decision-making around enlargement, the role of national political parties in this policy can be crucial. This policy brief is an enquiry into European national political parties' positions on EU enlargement. It was compiled by gathering information from party programmes, parliamentary debates, news media and think-tank sources. In addition, it relies on interviews with a number of experts and journalists with specific subject matter expertise. It covers selected (non-social democratic) political parties in 13 of 27 member states, chosen on the basis of their relevance to the enlargement process.

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MOVING TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE GREEN AGENDA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

ABSTRACT

This policy brief examines the attempts of the Western Balkans (WB) to transition from a carbon-based to a carbon-free economy, highlighting the role in this of European Union's (EU) Green Agenda. Introduced in 2020 as part of the EU's broader Green Deal, the Green Agenda provides a framework for aligning the region with EU environmental goals, even though the countries of the WB are not members of the EU. The brief explores how the Green Agenda contributes to the WB's integration in the Union through environmental reforms and the alignment of the region's economic and institutional systems with EU standards. Progress has been made in the WB in adopting renewable energy sources, climate adaptation strategies and legislative changes, but significant challenges remain. These include coal dependency, inadequate waste and water management, air pollution and energy poverty. This brief identifies areas for improvement, stressing the need to implement a more inclusive approach and to foster multilevel governance in the pursuit of enhanced transparency and accountability. Additionally, it emphasises the importance of addressing the transition fatigue that may be a consequence of pursuing EU accession. The analysis concludes by offering policy recommendations for strengthening the implementation of the Green Agenda and for ensuring that the regions transition to sustainability is fair, equitable and aligned with EU integration goals.

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