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Between 'Balkan Route' and 'European Path'

Harnessing societal ties to bridge discursive divides across Europe

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Content

Introduction

Studies and surveys regularly show that the European Union and its member states are discursively distancing[1] themselves from the so-called 'Western Balkans' Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia — in line with the declining appetite for new accessions following the 'big bang' enlargement of 2004, exacerbated by the ensuing global financial and polycrisis beginning in 2008. As a consequence, a large part of parliaments and citizens in the EU member states do not perceive the region as part of Europe. Frames such as the '(Western) Balkan Route' for asylum seekers and drug traffickers further reinforce the stigma, while EU officials' use of the term 'European Path' to describe the accession process deflects from the region's geographical position. Similarly, the 'Balkans' have (again) become the place to which 'Europe' exports inconvenient issues, with EU leaders striking legally problematic and non-transparent deals with local strongmen over the deportation of rejected migrants to Albania, Critical Raw Materials in Serbia, or hosting foreign prisoners in Kosovo.

In reality, however, integration has steadily deepened despite a growing distance in (political) rhetoric, with more movement of people and goods than ever, and closer cooperation on continental, bilateral, and societal levels.

While the ongoing enlargement process facilitates this, its stagnation also impacts economic and democratic development, and increases the countries' vulnerability to common European challenges, affecting the continent as a whole. In light of unprecedented challenges and a declared "geopolitical imperative for enlargement[2]" following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is therefore high time to move beyond artificial divides and discursive dichotomies, and to build on the deep connections to increase societal resilience.

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1   Economides, S., Featherstone, K., & Hunter, T. (2024). The changing discourses of EU Enlargement: A longitudinal analysis of National Parliamentary debates. Journal of Common Market Studies, 62(1), 168–185.

2   EU Enlargement: Strategic Outlook and Challenges for 2025. DGAP, 10.12.2024. Link: https://dgap.org/en/mediacenter/eu-enlargement-strategic-outlook-and-challenges-2025.

Mapping Connections

Given their geographical location, strong and long-standing relations between the region and the rest of Europe have existed for centuries. Diaspora communities have settled in various places and at different times, notably the ethnic Albanian Arbëreshë in Italy, who have developed a unique culture and variation of the language. As parts of Southeast Europe belonged to Austro-Hungary for decades, common traditions and cultural traits developed, many of which still exist today. More recently, more than one million *gastarbeiters* from Yugoslavia settled especially in Austria and Germany, which later also became the main EU destinations for refugees during the post-Yugoslav wars, together with Sweden.

Nonetheless, increasing EU integration naturally widened the gap between those within and those outside the Union. European countries not interested in full membership were able to negotiate bilateral agreements, or engage with the EU through frameworks such as the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). Others, including Albania and the countries of former Yugoslavia – except for Slovenia, which joined the EU in 2004 – signed Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs) with the EU, aiming to deepen bilateral relations and adopt EU norms towards eventual membership. This prospect was officially presented to them in the 2003 Thessaloniki Declaration, but has so far only been realised by Croatia. In the meantime, a myriad of additional regional and individual deals has been struck with the EU itself and the member states, usually to either extend EU control to areas such as migration or climate action, or facilitate access of the accession countries to EU common policies, such as labour migration, customs agreements, and student mobility.

As part of the SAAs, the six countries enjoy exceptional trade measures that exempt most products from import duties in the EU. They are part of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), the Transport Community, the Single Market and Digital Europe programmes, and receive financial support through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). Except for Kosovo, all of the countries participate in the taxation and customs cooperation programmes Fiscalis 2020 and Customs 2020, alongside Turkey. The Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans and, more recently, individual Growth Plans[3] aim at increasing economic performance and gradual integration into the EU single market. All passports from the region are subject to visa liberalisation with the EU, allowing their holders visa-free stays of up to three months. The six countries are members of or partners to Europe-wide programmes such as Creative Europe, Horizon Europe, and covered by Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps programmes for youths. Umbrella organisations like the European Trade Union Confederation

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3   Mihajlović, M. New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. An important step forward, while much is yet to be done. EPC, 03/2024. Link: https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/PB_240318_New_Growth_Plan_Macek_EN.pdf.

(ETUC), the European Students' Union (ESU), the European Women's Lobby (EWL), and the European Disability Forum (EDF-FEPH) are open to their participation.

In the context of the enlargement process, the countries have access to bilateral capacity-building support through the Twinning and TAIEX (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange) initiatives. Annual Western Balkans Summits bring together leaders from across the continent. Furthermore, multiple bilateral agreements exist between individual EU and candidate states – often neighbouring countries or those hosting large diaspora communities – and between member states and the region as a whole. Apart from the widely criticised migration deal, Italy and Albania cooperate in the naval, agriculture, and energy sectors. Germany's 'Westbalkanregelung'[4] (Western Balkans Regulation) allows up to 25,000 workers from the region to enter the country annually on employment contracts, while its regional Climate Partnership[5] aims to improve local conditions in line with the accession process. Moreover, the leaders of Hungary and Serbia have continuously deepened their strategic partnership, most recently in the area of defence.

However, such treaties, including the examples mentioned above, are not without problems, as they are usually elite-driven and respond primarily to specific interests of the EU and its member states, while lacking transparency and democratic oversight of the people they most affect. Take the example of medical workers in Germany, around 20 per cent of whom were trained in the Western Balkans. The demand and competition for staff has given rise to commercial agencies aggressively targeting workers in their countries of origin and earning significant fees for every contract they broker, while sometimes employing practices akin to human trafficking[6]. Albania, particularly suffering from an exodus of medical workers, has long been the focus of advertising by German employment agencies — and even by the German health ministry itself. In response, the Albanian government has introduced measures to retain at least part of its workforce, citing the mounting public cost of professional training for emigrants and broader societal effects of 'brain drain'. Meanwhile, the Budapest-Belgrade axis is part of a growing anti-democratic network in Europe and beyond.

The issues are further exacerbated by the stagnation in the enlargement process and the perception of the region through a mere geopolitical lens following the 2008 financial and subsequent polycrisis.[7] The resulting disengagement of EU actors diminished their influence and extended the space for other forces – such as Russia, China, Turkey, and the Gulf States – to assert themselves. This allowed local elites to tighten their grip on power by feeding their clientelist networks with money from non-transparent deals, while simultaneously increasing their countries' dependency on autocratic counterparts. Well-known examples include the Chinese loan for the Bar-Boljare highway in Montenegro and other large-scale infrastructure projects. While awareness of the implications for EU interests has grown in Brussels, the waning enlargement perspective no longer serves as an effective antidote —particularly given the EU's own support for regional strongmen perceived as guarantors of stability, in whose favour democratic backsliding was regularly overlooked.

On the other hand, the vast interpersonal and inter-societal connections harbour yet untapped

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4   Fragen und Antworten zur Westbalkanregelung. Mediendienst Integration. 11.04.2025, Link: https://mediendienst-integration.de/artikel/fragen-und-antworten-zur-westbalkanregelung.html.

5   Bilateral Climate and Development Partnerships. BMZ, 01/2025. Link: https://www.bmz.de/resource/blob/206798/factsheet-p-westbalkan-en-03.pdf.

6   Rujevic, N. et al. Balkan caregiver recruitment akin to 'human trafficking'. DW, 14.01.2020. Link: https://www.dw.com/en/balkan-nurses-headed-to-german-hospitals-a-lush-business-for-intermediaries/a-5196020.

7   Vulović, M. Economic Relations between the Western Balkans and Non-EU Countries. SWP, 07/2023, Link: https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2023C36_WesternBalkans.pdf.

potential[8] that is often dismissed in emotionalised debates on so-called 'welfare migration' , which are rife with stereotypes, particularly regarding ethnic Albanians. According to Eurostat, more than 2.5 million citizens from the six countries currently hold residence permits in the EU, mostly in Germany, Austria, Italy, Greece, and Sweden — compared to a total regional population of around 17 million. This figure does not include those with EU citizenship and their children. While some countries like Kosovo engage with their diaspora through dedicated ministries and forums, the lack of comprehensive data and systematic outreach make it difficult to assess their demographics accurately.

Apart from untapped potential, steady emigration is a massive challenge for the countries of origin and a key factor inhibiting development. While some emigrants send remittances and invest 'back home', they primarily pay taxes and buy goods in the EU. In addition to the net GDP loss, societal investments in educating youths who leave to apply their skills elsewhere amount to almost 2.5 billion euros annually, according to some estimates.[9] Combining all of these factors, the IPA II multiannual budget 2014-2020 of 7.5 billion euros for the six countries pales in comparison. However, while 'brain drain' is acknowledged as a problem by the EU, member states' interests in filling gaps in their own workforces with young, well-educated European workers invariably prevail.

Somewhat paradoxically, the existing depth of relations makes deeper integration of the six countries less attractive to existing member states. EU-based businesses can already sell their products in and hire workers from the region, EU citizens do not require visas to visit family members or tourist destinations, and the contract agents supporting development and political dialogue lead comfortable lives on matchless salaries. The accession countries have adapted to the liminal state of (non-)enlargement, often creating an ever-growing diaspora that, in turn, fuels the local economy through remittances and investments and thereby generates an outward stability that deflects the sense of urgency to 'deal' with them. Meanwhile, the trade deficit increases, with pre-accession money nowhere near sufficient to keep pace with cohesion funds, while high-level organised crime – from illegal deforestation and stone quarries in Bosnia-Herzegovina to real estate and construction in Albania and Serbia – flourishes, with corruption literally killing people[10].

A central argument for an increased 'geopolitical imperative' for enlargement to the region and beyond, following Russia's war in Ukraine, is security. Drawing on the (equally unhelpful) metaphor of the countries as 'Europe's soft underbelly'[11], the lack of stability and the presence of geopolitical competitors are cited as arguments for faster integration. There are two main problems with this line of reasoning, however. While the region is more vulnerable to malign influence, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are now NATO members, while foreign military missions remain on guard in Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Despite tensions and military actions from Serbia toward Kosovo and secessionist moves by the President of the Bosnian Serb-majority entity Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik in Bosnia-Herzegovina, threat assessments fail to produce a similar sense of urgency as in Ukraine and Moldova. Secondly, a negative framing alone will never prevail in the primarily political discourse around enlargement. Neither can it win the hearts and minds of EU citizens who have a direct say in the matter, especially in an increasingly polarised political and information sphere.

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8   Labour Migration in the Western Balkans. OECD, 16.05.2022. Link: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/labour-migration-in-the-western-balkans_af3db4f9-en.html.

9   Retaining its most valuable resource? Western Balkan countries lose up to 2.46 billion euros annually due to youth emigration. WFD, 31.08.2021. Link: https://www.wfd.org/commentary/retaining-its-most-valuable-resource-western-balkan-countries-lose-246-billion-euros.

10   Cevik, M. S., & Jalles, J. T. Corruption kills: Global evidence from natural disasters. IMF, 27.10.2023. Link: https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2023/10/27/Corruption-Kills-Global-Evidence-from-Natural-Disasters-539659.

11   Huskic, S. Fortress Europe and Western Balkan as its Soft Underbelly. European Fund for the Balkans, 09/2015. Link: https://www.balkan-fund.org/site/pubs/uploads/publications/other%20links/Fortress_Europe.pdf.

Tackling Joint Challenges

Since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, European leaders outdo each other in declaring a 'European watershed' and a 'new momentum' for EU enlargement. However, after more than a decade of stagnation, the key dynamics have not seen a necessary reset, and a stark contrast emerges between the EU's attitude towards 'old' and 'new' candidates, which is particularly striking in the differing approaches to the authoritarian regimes in Serbia and Georgia. The Commission's strategy in the ,Western Balkans' appears to reward minimal progress, while ignoring democratic backsliding in an attempt to convince elites to implement reforms which often contradict their own interests. Meanwhile, a consensus among the member states has emerged on the necessity of enlargement, but their views on how to move forward differ widely[12] and remain far from the unified and comprehensive strategy needed to accelerate the process.[13]

Dubbed a 'geopolitical imperative', insisting the process is 'merit-based' has long since failed to disguise its fundamentally *political* nature. North Macedonia was the first country of the region to be granted candidate status in 2005, a full five years before Montenegro. But blockages, first by Greece, consequently by France, and currently by Bulgaria, based on identity issues and national interests unrelated to the EU *acquis*, have prevented the country from starting negotiations. While 'good neighbourly relations' are a criterion for membership, conditioning constitutional changes creates a stark power imbalance at odds with this ideal.

In Serbia, President Aleksandar Vučić, protégé of ultranationalist war criminal Vojislav Šešelj, has been steadily dismantling the weak democratic structures and sowing regional instability[14] since returning to power in 2012. His government's friendly stance and bilateral deals with Russia and China have caused criticism from EU capitals; his revisionism and warmongering much less so. Rather than calling out crudely rigged elections, crackdowns on media and civil society, and rampant corruption, the EU Commission closes ranks with Vučić and commends contrived progress, even while his government faces unprecedented domestic criticism. In a similar vein, appeasement towards Dodik directly contradicts the EU's chief interest of stability in the region.

Evidently, despite the increasingly perilous global disorder Europe is faced with, key leaders resist a necessary change of dynamics. In

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12   Butras, P. & Morina, E. Catch-27: The contradictory thinking about enlargement in the EU. ECFR, 23.11.2023. Link: https://ecfr.eu/publication/catch-27-the-contradictory-thinking-about-enlargement-in-the-eu/.

13   Seebass, F. Making the enlargement momentum work. SWP, 01/2025. Link: https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/WP_Enlargement_Momentum_Seebass.pdf.

14   Elek, B. How Brussels Risks Undermining Serbia's Democratization Potential. HBS, 02.04.2025. Link: https://www.boell.de/en/2025/04/02/how-brussels-risks-undermining-serbias-democratization-potential.

light of the multitude and magnitude of crises, this attitude is utterly dangerous. Apart from an increasingly aggressive Russia, whose multi-vector warfare affects the entire continent, the climate crisis continues to endanger livelihoods, ageing societies and urbanisation increase pressure on the social welfare systems as wealth gaps widen exponentially, a rapidly changing technology and media sphere disrupt democratic principles, and far-right alliances shake the very foundation of the post-war European order. Given the geographical inescapability, existing deep connections, and vital interests, retaining the status quo rather than ramping up efforts to find common solutions is outright reckless.

Their partial integration into EU mechanisms, weak state structures, and mass emigration leave Southeast Europe especially exposed to internal and external threats. Existing EU programmes to mitigate these – such as supporting energy diversification to decrease emissions and dependencies on Russia, or countering Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) – often disregard the root causes of these problems. Chief among these are state capture[15] by elites, many of whom date back to the 1990s, the suppression of media freedom, weak judicial institutions and rule of law, and the denial of democratic participation to (parts of) society — in short, the very fundamental freedoms which are supposed to come first in the accession process. Instead, EU and member state officials continue to negotiate with these very elites[16], losing credibility among the pro-democratic actors of change on whom they depend to push for reforms.

15   Cvetičanin, P., Bliznakovski, J., & Krstić, N. (2023). Captured states and/or captured societies in the Western Balkans. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 24(1), 41–62.

16   Zweers, W. & Cretti, G. The EU as a promoter of 'stabilitocracy' in the Western Balkans? Clingendael, 08.02.2022. Link: https://www.clingendael.org/publication/eu-promoter-stabilitocracy-western-balkans

Discursive Dichotomies as Obstacles to Joint Approaches

A major factor perpetuating this vicious cycle and self-fulfilling prophecy of the countries not being 'enlargement ready' is the discourse and communication around enlargement, notably regarding Turkey and the so-called 'Western Balkans'. The term was coined during the Austrian EU Council presidency in 1998 to differentiate the countries, then still including Croatia, from Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovenia in the working group dealing with them, named to this day 'Committee on the Western Balkans' (COWEB). However, the very name 'Balkan' is historically stigmatised and evokes negative associations, including among the peoples so labelled.

The invasion of Southeast Europe by the Ottomans[17] in the 15th century changed Europeans' perception of their continent, and a new boundary emerged between the Christian and non-Christian worlds. Reductionist and homogenised stereotypes of the region's backwardness dominated under Habsburg rule and were consolidated in the context of the Balkan Wars (1912-13) and the role the region played in the First World War. Up to this point, the 'Balkans' had always been discursively linked to Europe despite its border position, which changed with the spread of the term 'Balkanisation' in politics and media from 1918. Originally associated with secessionist movements in the Ot-

toman Empire, it became synonymous with the disintegration into small, dysfunctional states during the fall of the Habsburg and Romanov empires.

The depictions of the 'Balkans' in literature, from Agatha Christie's 1925 novel "The Secret of Chimneys", introducing the country of 'Herzoslovakia', to the 1947 Tintin comic set in fictional 'Syldavia' further fed the idea of a wild region inhabited by violent peoples. Even more decisive were supposedly scientific works such as Rebecca West's "Black Lamb and Grey Falcon. A Journey through Yugoslavia" (1982) and Robert Kaplan's "Balkan Ghosts" (1993), which fuelled the idea that ethnic identity and hatred in the 'Balkans' are innate and that war is therefore inevitable. In fact, then-US President Clinton initially rejected an intervention[18] in the Bosnian War for these reasons. In the discourse surrounding the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia, this interpretation once again gained great prominence.

At the same time, the region became a (discursive) threat to the European project and its principles: the wars and conflicts marked a return to a specific type of nationalism that the progressive West believed it had overcome after the Second World War. In this way, the temporal and the geographical 'other' of Euro-

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17   Norris, D. A. (1999). *Constructing the Balkans. In the Wake of the Balkan Myth: Questions of Identity and Modernity*, 1–14.

18   Kaufman, M.T.: The Dangers of Letting a President Read. *The New York Times*, 22.05.1999. Link: https://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/22/books/the-dangers-of-letting-a-president-read.html.

pe partially merged. Bulgarian historian Maria Todorova famously developed the concept of 'Balkanism' for this ahistorical and neo-hegemonic attitude of (Western) Europe towards the southeast of the continent. To this day, it serves as Europe's discursive 'other'[19], a primitive condition that 'we' as 'true' Europeans have jointly overcome.

In enlargement policy, this dichotomy has been reinforced by common frames such as the 'European path' the countries are on, implying that, despite their geographical location, they are not truly 'European' until they join the EU. Similarly, complex problems are discursively dissociated and attributed to a seemingly distant 'Balkan route', which is blamed for Europe's problems rather than elected officials and their policies. At the very least, the artificially created – and discursively reinforced – boundaries between the EU and the accession countries[20] in Southeast Europe are unhelpful for finding joint solutions to the pressing problems facing the continent, and for increasing the acceptance of EU enlargement among the populations of EU member states.

19   Vukasović, D.M. *The actorness of the EU and the Western Balkans: towards permanent liminality?* IRISS, 2020. Link: http://iriss.idn.org.rs/1489/1/Rad%20M31%202020.pdf

20   Kolstø, P. (2016). 'Western Balkans' as the new Balkans: Regional names as tools for stigmatisation and exclusion. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68(7), 1245–1263.

Conclusion: Towards a Whole-of-Society Dialogue!

As this reflection has shown, discourse matters! It is high time to shift the conversation towards connections rather than divides, to find joint solutions for common challenges rather than relocating problems, and to widen the dialogue to include a much larger share of those affected by the European integration process. By acknowledging and expanding the deep connections that already exist, impact and accountability in the enlargement process can be increased on all sides, placing people and their needs at the centre of joint deliberations of a shared future. Naturally, this should not only include the 'old' candidates from Southeast Europe to Turkey but also the 'new' ones, as well as non-EU members like the United Kingdom and Switzerland. By going beyond the leadership level, such exchanges across all levels of society can build on the long-standing but often neglected foundations between societies, economies, and cultures.

Europe is at an important juncture where its own future in the global order will be decided, and its room for manoeuvre is shrinking. Starting with security, an important shift will be to broaden the scope from a purely military understanding to a more holistic one – assessing how societies can become more resilient to the multitude of external and internal threats. Not least, this must include the acknowledgement that the EU itself, and the region's proximity to it, is a key factor in insecurity. After all, the origin and destination of the people and drugs trafficked via the 'Balkan route' is not the region but the EU, chiefly Western Europe, which is also the main beneficiary of its disastrous exodus of (human) capital.

The same is true for environmental threats. Bad air quality kills more people in Southeast Europe each year than anywhere else on the continent, but this does not mean that it is not also a significant issue in EU member states. While these have access to common instruments and funds to mitigate the effects, the projects deployed in the Western Balkans are nowhere near sufficient to tackle pollution. In 2026, the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) will come into effect and is likely to severely impact[21] the region's economies. Given their geography, treating this as a non-EU problem disregards the fact that emissions are not subject to borders, and the impact will not be regionally contained. Nor can quick fixes such as Climate Partnerships or FIMI Strategies serve as solutions, as long as common root causes are ignored.

As history has shown, proximity means we cannot escape each other's problems or hide ours in a perceived 'backyard'. Rather, it is time to support and expand inter-societal dialogues and include a wide range of local actors in the

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21 Allert, V., Larina, M., & Gläser, A. (2023). Impacts of the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism on the Western Balkans and Ukraine: Policy Options for Governments.

ongoing debates on the future of Europe, using a bold democratic approach. Far beyond aiming at gradual integration on the technical level through growth plans and elite cooperation, this must focus on a broader political and societal level. Good examples include inter-parliamentary meetings such as the Willy Brandt Programme for EU Enlargement by the Socialists & Democrats in the European Parliament (EP), and the successful pilot programme by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) to include trade unions and civil society organisations from the candidate countries in their debates.

Other lessons can be drawn from the Conference on the Future of Europe – to which accession countries were regrettably not invited – and the Berlin Process, a format introduced by Germany following the halt to EU enlargement in 2014. It aims at deepening inter-regional cooperation and has steadily expanded its scope from heads of state to business, civil society, parliaments, and youth, as well as covering a multitude of topics from agriculture to Rom:nja rights. It also provides a space for the UK despite its departure from the EU, including by hosting the 2025 Summit.

In 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron established the European Political Community, a format extending beyond the EU to enable enhanced dialogue and strategic coordination between EU and non-EU states. Learning from the Berlin Process, it could be broadened to (semi-)permanent working groups on key issues, drawing from all realms of society in the participating states. Not least, a more inclusive and democratic approach would benefit the European project as a whole, increasing meaningful participation and ownership, and thereby strengthening societal resilience across the continent.

Recommendations

On the EU level: Diversify & synchronise strategies!

→ Based on the EESC pilot, direct participation of candidate countries in EU bodies should be extended across the board to increase joint learning, understanding, and capacities. Rather than relying solely on elites, EU actors should engage directly with local experts and involve them as advisors to get a better assessment and increase trust in the European project. Only in this way can the EU be a reliable partner and implement long-term goals such as the Global Gateway and its Critical Raw Materials Act, and, more broadly, de-risking and near-shoring attempts. Another key factor is increased and streamlined communication based on these assessments. In an increasingly competitive and hostile global environment, trust is the EU's key currency!

→ As such, the EU must protect its current and future citizens from global threats posed by a largely profit-driven online sphere impacting mental health and free speech, growing societal inequalities perpetuated by the housing crisis, and far-right networks dismantling democratic institutions. Defending and expanding on the Digital Services and Digital Markets Acts (DSA, DMA) in the face of transatlantic backlash, strengthening the EU's Social Pillar, and providing consistent support to democracy defenders while sanctioning anti-democratic forces are crucial here.

→ Rather than attempting to 'close off the Balkan Route' by striking deals with non-democratic leaders, risking dependencies such as the 'Migration Deal' with the Turkish government, cooperation and joint trainings should be extended, with a focus on human rights, rather than relying on local police to do the 'dirty work'. As a first step, the term 'Western Balkans' should be scrapped from all public communication, to also increase acceptance within EU member states. It must be clear that whether Andorran or Albanian, Maltese or Macedonian, Slovak or Serb — Europe must be united (in diversity) to move forward.

→ All candidate countries should be involved in relevant EU programmes that foster exchange and mutual learning. For example, the DiscoverEU programme currently includes only North Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey among the candidate countries. Political parties in the European Parliament should build on existing exchanges with associated parties in the region, advocate for their observer status in the EP, and extend inter-party dialogues. With support for the EU on the rise, as shown by the Eurobarometer, it is time to foster the continent's democratic consolidation.

→ The Council should agree on a process to solve the issue of Kosovo's non-recognition, defining clear conditions and formats of engagement beyond the EU-facilitated dialogue. The lack of consensus is also a

security threat, as it undermines the EU as a foreign policy actor and is exploited by Russia and far-right forces in Europe for their revisionist narratives. At the same time, Kosovo's exclusion from forums such as the Council of Europe and the Civil Protection Mechanism leaves its population especially vulnerable.

→ Serbia, meanwhile, as the largest and most influential country, is the key to the region's transformation process. Despite the deliberate dismantling of democratic institutions, EU actors have for too long supported a president who has captured and destabilised the region. The EU must support the demands of the ongoing protests and offer a constructive hand in mitigating the political crisis.

On state level (current & future members): Boost human potential & societal resilience!

→ In order to tap into the vast potential of diaspora communities, a comprehensive assessment of their demographics and ties is needed, as well as an intersectoral approach linking origin and host communities and involving actors from politics, education, business, and youth. Together, they can develop strategies towards mutual benefits, systematic cooperation, and joint learning. It is crucial to empower local and regional authorities, including in the enlargement process, to strengthen absorption capacities and ensure alignment with local needs and EU principles. Municipalities in EU member states can also advocate for their partners to join the EU Committee of the Regions (CoR) as observers. Similarly, municipal partnerships are a key asset in increasing inter-societal exchange and can foster ownership and solidarity in the enlargement process. Building on existing

ties and creating joint formats can empower local political participation and increase societal resilience.

→ Crucially, much more space needs to be given to those most affected by contemporary threats, notably youth. While better educated than any generation before them, they face the prospect of declining quality of life compared to their parents, disproportionately living in precarious conditions due to rent inflation and youth unemployment across Europe. As they are on the forefront of new developments, from technology to military conscription, they also need to be at the helm of creating common solutions, building on insights such as those from the FES Youth Studies[22] and best practices from national youth strategies to permanent youth parliaments, ensuring meaningful participation mindful of intersectional challenges.

→ Finally, opportunism comes at a price! Those defending democracy must not betray its principles for short-term interests but uphold the deliberative process — otherwise the principles lose their power when challenged by others. At the same time, progressive forces must use existing and develop new democratic tools to fight malign influence. Daring more democracy at all levels is crucial to defending the European idea, and should include a comprehensive review of internal and external EU policies, led by a coalition of willing member and candidate states. Crucially, a stronger welfare state and reduced inequality strengthen societal cohesion. Countries benefitting from 'brain drain' should also engage directly with countries of origin to mitigate the negative effects through investments and exchange, rather than relying on dubious agencies.

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22   FES Youth Studies. Link: https://democracy.fes.de/topics/youth-studies.html.

On (civil) society level:
Organise in European networks!

→ Engaging with European advocacy networks can inform joint actions and strengthen their impact. For example, none of the civil society umbrella organisations mentioned above currently include all candidate countries. As civic space is shrinking, organising and pooling resources is vital for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), independent media, trade unions, and cultural institutions. Joint trainings – from civil protection to environmental campaigning – foster mutual learning, solidarity, and joint approaches to common (European) challenges grounded in fact-based analyses to counter political emotionalisation, as well as joint ownership and resilience. Particular focus should be given to the inclusion of rural and disadvantaged communities.

→ Local Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are often deeply anchored in their communities. Making up the vast majority of companies and employers in Europe, they are at the forefront of the green transition and demographic challenges, and key recipients of labour migration. Forums like international chambers of commerce and European umbrella organisations like SMEunited and Eurochambre can help expand trust, skills, and community-based advocacy. Here again, accession countries remain underrepresented, missing opportunities for joint advocacy. A well-established sector is tourism to the region, though apart from beach destinations, it has so far primarily catered for the diaspora. Expanding existing infrastructure to promote hiking, skiing, and horseback riding, among others, in some of Europe's most scenic mountainscapes could support local businesses and foster interpersonal ties. It might even contribute to shifting the connotation of their name – the Balkans – in the European mind.

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EU's foreign policy towards Kosovo.

Between 'Balkan Route' and 'European Path'

While the EU and its member states often adopt rhetoric that distances 'Europe' from the so-called 'Western Balkans', integration has, in fact, steadily deepened, and cooperation increased at the continental, bilateral, and societal levels. As Europe finds itself at a crucial juncture, with its place in the global order at stake and its room for manoeuvre shrinking, it is high time to support and expand inter-societal dialogues and include a wide range of actors in the ongoing debates about the future of the continent.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
↗ **brussels.fes.de**