

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe (RSSEE SG)

“Spotlight on Southeast Europe’s EU Integration – What Remains of Democratization and Peace-Building?”

50th RSSEE SG Workshop
„Regional Stability in South East Europe“
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PfP Consortium of Defense
Academies and Security
Studies Institutes



Executive Summary of Recommendations

- **EU:** Revise the merit-based enlargement methodology for states where political obstruction is systematic and intentional (targeted personal sanctions, not general ones).
- **EU:** Avoid a disadvantaged position of the WB compared to the accelerated accession negotiations of Ukraine and Moldova.
- **EU:** Reframe enlargement toward the WB as a geostrategic instrument of EU’s wider security architecture.
- **EU:** Prioritise practical derisking measures aimed at reducing candidate states’ exposure to dependencies on autocratic powers.
- **EU:** Support the executive mandate of EUFOR Althea and the OHR.
- **EU:** Grant Kosovo EU candidate status as a strategic step to anchor its European perspective.
- **EU/NATO:** Take a clear stance regarding critical trends in Serbia’s militarisation and continued government violations of democratic principles.
- **Montenegrin government:** Intensify bilateral talks with Croatia, France and the Netherlands in order to address potential obstacles to early accession.
- **EU:** Support Montenegro in countering ongoing and potential hybrid activities aimed at undermining its EU accession.

Situation Analysis

Since the EU Thessaloniki Summit (2003), the process of integrating the Western Balkan (WB) states into the EU has gone through various phases. The first decade showed substantial EU support for necessary transformation processes and an improvement in regional relations by implementing various civilian and military CSDP missions as well as contributing to institutional reforms and the launch of regional cooperation initiatives in the WB. Croatia’s accession to the EU (2013) – the most recent to date – took place during a new phase in which the EU moved away from a pro-active policy towards the WB.

Despite granting all WB states (except Kosovo) candidate status and maintaining the bureaucratic integration process, there was no credible strategic commitment to enlargement by the EU. Simultaneously, authoritarian tendencies in the region intensified, leading to a regres-

sion in regional relations and a deterioration in the security situation, making it unthinkable to terminate the EUFOR ALTHEA and KFOR peace missions. As a result of the increased geopolitical tensions linked to the Russian attacks on Ukraine since 2022, the EU’s integration policy toward the WB has regained strategic momentum. However, this newfound sense of urgency and strategic relevance of the WB cannot prevent exacerbating existing tensions and undermining trust in the EU’s commitment, should geopolitical considerations not be matched by credible policy adjustments. Gradual integration as envisaged by the EU would allow citizens to experience the benefits of EU integration before full accession. However, this is conditional on the approach not serving as a substitute for full accession and on democratic and peace-building objectives being pursued more consistently.

In regional terms, the gap between the progressive candidate countries Montenegro and Albania and the politically and security-wise more problematic triangle comprising Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia – with North Macedonia situated in-between – must be constructively narrowed. Ultimately, the positive symbolic significance of Montenegro's imminent accession to the EU should not be underestimated; given the highly polarised situation in Serbia, Montenegro's progress could act as a catalyst for positive change in other candidate countries. However, this is conditional on the EU Member States presenting a more credible integration policy, and on Montenegro being able to resolve outstanding bilateral issues – particularly with Croatia – in the near future.

Policy Recommendations

With Reference to the EU's General Integration Policy – Recommendations for the EU Commission, European External Action Service (EEAS) and EU Member States

- To strengthen resilience, reframe enlargement in the WB as a geostrategic instrument of the EU's wider security architecture and democratic consolidation, as well as an important element of the Union's future energy and economic strategy, not as a long-term administrative process based on technical compliance.
- Safeguard, promote and communicate clearly the fundamental democratic values behind the accession criteria both in the pre- and post-accession period.
- "Deepening before enlarging": The discussion of internal reforms in the EU should not become an impediment for support of enlargement – a qualified majority voting in the Council, especially regarding foreign and security policy, would enable faster decisions.
- Tangible interim benefits are essential for maintaining the attractiveness of enlargement, such as gradual integration into the single market, increased access to EU funding, abolition of roaming charges for citizens of the WB-6 region, or a more flexible Entry/Exit System (EES). However, these measures must be clearly linked to the ultimate goal of full membership to avoid the perception of a permanent intermediate status.
- Advance the integration of the WB-6 within the enlargement framework to avoid a disadvantaged position of the WB candidates compared to the accelerated accession negotiations of Ukraine and Moldova by providing clearer timelines with stricter and more consistent conditionality.
- Revise the merit-based enlargement methodology by distinguishing between a lack of administrative capacity and deliberate political obstruction. Non-compliance caused by vetoing actors should trigger targeted political consequences and personal sanctions rather than generalised punishment of citizens.
- Reconsider the role of bilateral disputes within the enlargement framework not to ignore them, but to carefully manage their ability to block progress on accession.
- Strengthen the EU's engagement with societal actors in the Western Balkans. Civil society organisations, independent media, and other non-state actors play a crucial role in promoting accountability and supporting reform processes.
- Provide the transfer of knowledge and best practices in the field of countering Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), with particular emphasis on cooperation with media actors and civil society organisations.
- Emphasise the importance of the reconciliation process and continue supporting regional and national reconciliation initiatives. Particular attention should be given to fostering intensive participation of young people from diverse societal groups, civil society, academia, or political parties.



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With Reference to the Role of the United States in the Western Balkans

- **To US government:** Resume your indispensable responsibility as one of the main designers of the 1244- and Dayton-regimes to further guarantee stability in the region, support EU-accession of WB states, and subordinate possible private business interests.

With Reference to Albania

- **To Albanian government:** Ensure that reforms are effectively implemented in practice and not merely introduced in a formal sense. This includes strengthening judicial independence, consolidating justice and rule of law reforms, improving media freedom, and increasing public trust in institutions.

With Reference to Bosnia and Herzegovina

- **To EU member states:** Support the continued executive mandate of EUFOR Althea, ensure credible troop levels and rapid reinforcement capacity, and politically back the OHR when BiH's constitutional order is attacked. International executive safeguards in BiH should be maintained until domestic institutions are demonstrably able to resist anti-constitutional obstruction without external guarantees. Premature withdrawal or weakening of OHR and EUFOR would create a security vacuum and embolden actors seeking to destabilise the state.
- **To Dayton signatory states/members of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC):** Retain at least the minimal, indispensable executive powers of the High Representative together with the necessary basic structures to support the implementation of the envoy's responsibilities. Otherwise, BiH would lose the only person and structure that can act as the safeguard against a resumption of violent hostilities and separatist ambitions.
- **To OSCE mission/EU Delegation to Sarajevo:** Support the BiH Central Election Commission in implementing new voting technologies to ensure fair and transparent elections in October 2026.
- **To EU Council of Ministers:** Introduce targeted sanctions against individuals and their enter-

prises, undermining the Dayton Peace Agreement and EU integration processes.

With Reference to Kosovo

- **To Parliamentary parties in Kosovo:** Resolve the institutional crisis, not least as a prerequisite for progress in relations with the EU.
- **To Kosovar government:** Sustain diplomatic efforts aimed at encouraging the five non-recognising EU member states to move progressively toward recognition of Kosovo.
- **To EU Commission:** Initiate the process of granting Kosovo EU candidate status as a strategic step to anchor its European perspective, strengthen reform incentives, and place it on a more predictable path of institutional convergence with the Union.
- **To EU Commission:** Apply conditionality symmetrically in the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue. If both parties are expected to implement obligations, both should face clear consequences for non-compliance.

With Reference to Montenegro

- **To Montenegrin government/EU Commission:** Finalise the closure of all remaining accession chapters so that a 2028 accession date remains realistic.
- **To Montenegrin government:** Address potential obstacles to accession by intensifying bilateral talks with Croatia, France and the Netherlands over their support in the EU Council.
- **To EU member states:** Reduce scepticism among your own population regarding Montenegro's accession to the EU, using strategic communication to inform about potential benefits to crucial sectors such as labour market, migration policy, or agriculture and the low impact of Montenegro's accession on the EU budget.
- **To EEAS:** Support Montenegro's government in countering ongoing and potential hybrid activities aimed at undermining the accession of Montenegro. This includes all actions of influence by third parties and their proxies from the region and beyond.

With Reference to North Macedonia

- **To the Government of North Macedonia:** To avoid a prolonged stalemate in the EU integration process fulfill agreed commitments, including amendments concerning the inclusion of Bulgarians in the constitution.

With Reference to Serbia

- **To EU/NATO:** Express formal concern regarding trends in Serbia's militarisation and assess their implications for regional stability through existing EU, NATO, and partner consultation mechanisms.
- **To the EU Commission:** Make clear that without full respect to rule of law, free and fair electoral process and freedom of media, no government in Serbia can be a credible partner.
- **To the EU Commission:** Make access to all pre-accession funds and funds from the Growth plan contingent upon compliance with aforementioned principles.
- **To the EU Commission/EU Council:** State unambiguously your support to all actors perpetuating the fight for freedom, democracy and rule of law in Serbia.
- **To the EU Commission/EU Council:** Implement personal sanctions against all public officials in Serbia engaged in human rights violations, including the seizing of their assets abroad.
- **To the EU Commission:** The concept of the "Serbian World" should be treated as incompatible with EU accession principles when it is used to justify interference in the internal political affairs of neighbouring states or challenge territorial integrity.

With Reference to the Experience of EU Member States in South East Europe

- **To EU Commission/EEAS:** Link progress in enlargement to credible contributions to the emerging European defence architecture, while excluding actors whose policies are demonstrably inconsistent with regional stability and European security objectives.

- **To EU Commission/EEAS:** Prioritise practical derisking measures aimed at reducing candidate states' exposure to dependencies on autocratic powers, with particular attention to Russia and China.
- **To EU Commission:** Require candidate states to assess and mitigate the effects of Russian strategic corruption on institutions, governance, and reform trajectories, drawing on lessons identified in current EU member states in the region.
- **To WB governments:** Establish durable cross-party consensus on EU-related reforms so that conditionality can be met with greater continuity, predictability, and institutional credibility.
- **To WB governments:** Strengthen democratic accountability, institutional trust, and regional confidence by promoting greater archival transparency, including access to former communist-era security files where legally and politically feasible.



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These policy recommendations reflect the findings of the 50th RSSEE workshop on "Spotlight on Southeast Europe's EU Integration – What Remains of Democratization and Peace-Building?", convened by the PfP Consortium Study Group "Regional Stability in South East Europe" in Reichenau/Rax, Austria, 7 – 10 May 2026. They were prepared by Predrag Jureković (Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna) on the basis of the proposals submitted by the participants. Valuable support in proofreading and layouting came from Agathe Formanek (Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna).