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Western Balkans and the EU: Keeping the Promise, Finishing the Job

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Introduction

This briefing is part of the “Western Balkans and the EU: Keeping the Promise, Finishing the Job” series, which aims to provide regular overviews of the current state of the European Union enlargement process in the Western Balkans. The updates seek to track political developments, reform progress, and institutional debates affecting Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia on their path toward EU membership. In addition to developments within the candidate countries themselves, the briefings also examine the evolving perspectives within EU institutions and member states in Brussels, highlighting key policy discussions, initiatives, and strategic considerations shaping the future of enlargement.

In a period marked by significant geopolitical turbulence, the EU’s enlargement debate in the Western Balkans has regained renewed attention on the Union’s agenda. While Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia remain formally engaged in the accession process and maintain varying degrees of commitment to closer integration, the depth and consistency of this orientation differ across countries and political contexts. Domestic political dynamics, leadership choices, and shifting strategic priorities have, in some cases, led to more ambivalent or contested approaches to EU alignment.

When the European Commission presented its „**Enlargement Package**“ end of last year, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stressed her commitment of „turning EU enlargement into a reality. Because a larger Union means a stronger and more influential Europe on the global stage.“ She also raised the idea of faster integration of candidate countries into the single market and emphasised the importance of safeguards to preserve democracy and the rule of law.

The European Commission is expected to publish soon a set of comprehensive **preenlargement policy reviews** designed to assess not only the accession prospects of candidate countries but also the EU’s own institutional readiness to “*deepen as it widens*”. These reviews aim to strike a balance between advancing enlargement and strengthening EU governance by examining policy

alignment, institutional reforms, and the robustness of budget frameworks, all while considering practical tools to improve decisionmaking without reopening the treaties.

At the core of the 2026 exercise are **four interlinked priorities**. First, the reviews will assess how well candidate countries have aligned their policies with EU standards, particularly in areas such as the rule of law, democratic governance, and fundamental rights, benchmarks considered essential for sustainable accession. Second, they will look ahead to the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034, identifying the budgetary adjustments required to support an enlarged Union. Third, institutional governance will be scrutinized to ensure that EU decisionmaking remains effective in a larger political entity. Finally, the reviews will address the preservation of core EU values, especially given recent concerns about democratic backsliding in some candidates and the broader implications for the Union’s credibility.¹

Rather than relying on formal treaty amendments, the Commission and Council are exploring the use of “soft law” instruments and existing treaty mechanisms, such as *passerelle* clauses, to facilitate procedural shifts from unanimity to qualified majority voting (QMV).²

While the Western Balkans remain the primary focus, these pre-enlargement discussions are situated within a broader context that includes Ukraine and Moldova. The EU’s annual enlargement reports underscore this wider picture: progress has been uneven, with some frontrunners making tangible advances and others, notably Serbia and Georgia, facing criticism for democratic and judicial deficiencies.³

While the European Parliament is drafting its own reports on the candidate countries, several innovative ideas are gaining traction. One proposal, initially discussed by the President of the European Council António Costa, is to **open individual negotiating chapters by QMV** while preserving unanimity for closing chapters. This would represent a politically sensible yet legally complex compromise between efficiency and memberstate sovereignty. Meanwhile, more radical options are also being considered, such as granting new members temporary accession with limited voting rights, including the suspension of veto powers, until they fully meet EU

¹ cor.europa.eu

² <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/03/31/what-should-eu-candidates-take-away-from-commissions-new-document-on-pre-enlargement-reforms>

³ commission.europa.eu

standards or even until the EU has managed to reform its voting system and replace unanimity by qualified majority voting (QMV).⁴

Another idea in the enlargement debate is “**reverse enlargement**.” This approach explores granting candidate countries *partial rights or provisional membership*, for instance, access to EU programs, the single market, or certain Council votes, before full accession, while withholding veto powers or full legislative influence until minimum governance standards are met. Essentially, it flips the traditional accession logic by integrating countries incrementally and conditionally, reducing the risk of internal deadlock in the EU and creating stronger incentives for candidates to continue implementing reforms. However, there appears to be little support for this model among the current EU member states.⁵

Taken together, the 2026 pre-enlargement policy reviews are poised to play a defining role in shaping how the EU navigates its dual challenge: deepening internal cohesion and institutional capacity while extending its political and economic framework to new partners.

A significant practical development in EU–Western Balkans relations concerns **roaming and connectivity** between EU member states and the six Western Balkan partners. In November 2025, the European Commission proposed to open negotiations with Western Balkan economies with the aim of extending the EU’s *Roam Like at Home* rules to the region. If agreed, this would allow citizens traveling between the EU and Western Balkans to use mobile services without additional roaming charges, removing a tangible barrier to mobility, strengthening people-to-people ties, and symbolizing deeper economic and social integration ahead of formal accession. The proposal reflects a broader EU commitment to practical integration tools that benefit citizens directly and support closer cooperation long before full membership is achieved such as the integration of Albania, Moldova, Montenegro and North Macedonia into EU’s SEPA scheme end of last year.⁶

When it comes to individual progress and the implementation of reforms on the EU path in the Western Balkans Six (WB6) over the past couple of months, **Montenegro and Albania have stood out**, demonstrating the most visible and tangible progress. This may also have contributed to the next EU–Western Balkans Summit being held in Montenegro on 1 June and Podgorica taking over the chairmanship of the Berlin Process this year.

Montenegro

Montenegro remains the most advanced candidate country within the framework of the European Union’s enlargement policy toward the Western Balkans. Since opening accession negotiations in 2012, the country has managed to provisionally close 14 out of the total 33 negotiation chapters, maintaining its position as the frontrunner among the Western Balkans Six. A particularly notable recent step was the closure of Chapter 32 on Financial Control in January 2026. This chapter focuses on the adoption of internationally recognised standards for public internal financial control, independent external auditing, and the implementation of EU best practices across the public sector. It also emphasises transparency, fiscal discipline, and the responsible management of both national and EU funds, core requirements for the protection of the EU’s financial interests and the functioning of the Union’s budgetary system.⁷

The Montenegrin government has set the ambitious strategic objective of joining the EU by 2028, with the goal of closing all remaining negotiation chapters by the end of 2026. Achieving this timeline will require a shift from a predominantly normative phase of reforms, focused on the formal alignment of legislation with EU standards, to a more substantive phase centred on implementation and measurable results. In particular, tangible progress in the areas of rule of law, judicial independence, anti-corruption policies, and the functioning of democratic institutions remains crucial for advancing in the negotiation process, as these issues form the backbone of the EU’s accession criteria and are closely monitored by the European Commission.⁸

The Government of Montenegro is entering what it describes as the final phase of the negotiation process, accompanied by a more clearly defined timeline for the closure of the remaining chapters. Several key steps are expected in the coming months, following the recent provisional closure of Chapter 21 - Trans-European Networks. This chapter addresses the integration of national transport, energy, and telecommunications infrastructure into EU-wide networks, an area that is particularly relevant for strengthening regional connectivity and facilitating economic integration with the EU single market.⁹

Although negotiations have been ongoing for more than a decade, the pace of progress has accelerated in recent years. Half of the chapters currently closed were provisionally concluded in 2024 alone, signalling

⁴ <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/wie-die-eu-ohne-risiko-weiter-wachsen-koennte-accg-110838952.html>

⁵ <https://www.euractiv.com/news/eu-expansion-plan-gets-tepid-response-from-capitals/>

⁶ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/hr/news/roam-home-commission-proposes-open-negotiations-extend-eu-roaming-western-balkans>

⁷ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/montenegro_en; <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/montenegro/>

⁸ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/montenegro_en; https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report_en

⁹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/03/17/eu-and-montenegro-provisionally-close-chapter-on-trans-european-networks-in-accession-negotiations/>

renewed political momentum in the accession process. Nevertheless, the success of the final phase will depend not only on technical alignment with EU legislation but also on Montenegro's ability to demonstrate credible and sustainable reforms, particularly in strengthening the rule of law and ensuring institutional accountability. If these conditions are met, Montenegro could remain the leading candidate in the enlargement process and potentially become the next member state of the European Union in the coming years.¹⁰

Yet, despite Montenegro's clear progress and frontrunner status in the EU accession process, internal political dynamics continue to pose potential obstacles. High levels of political polarization between pro-EU forces and those aligned with pro-Serbia or pro-Russia interests could slow reform implementation, particularly in areas such as judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, and the strengthening of democratic institutions. Sustained commitment across political divides will be essential to maintain momentum, demonstrate credible governance, and ensure that the ambitious 2028 accession target remains achievable. In this sense, Montenegro's EU trajectory reflects not only technical alignment with EU standards but also the broader challenge of consolidating domestic consensus in support of the European path.

Albania

Albania has emerged as one of the fastest-advancing candidate countries in the Western Balkans region on the path toward EU membership. As of March 2026, the Albanian government has articulated an ambitious objective: to conclude accession negotiations by 2027 and potentially achieve full EU membership by 2030. The country has made notable *procedural* progress in the negotiation process, particularly by completing the EU accession screening process, the analytical review of national legislation against the EU *acquis*, and opening all six negotiation clusters, which together encompass the 33 chapters of EU law. The screening process for all clusters was successfully completed in November 2025, marking a key milestone in Albania's accession trajectory.¹¹

A significant step in this process occurred on 17 November 2025, when Cluster 5 – Resources, Agriculture and Cohesion was opened, completing the opening of all clusters within a relatively short timeframe. In total, Albania managed to open all negotiating clusters in roughly 13 months, representing one of the fastest procedural advancements in the history of EU enlargement

negotiations. This rapid progress reflects both domestic reform efforts and the EU's renewed geopolitical interest in accelerating the integration of the Western Balkans into the Union.¹²

Full alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) further strengthens Albania's candidacy. Albania consistently maintains 100 percent alignment with EU foreign policy positions and sanctions regimes, a level of geopolitical alignment that Brussels considers a key strategic asset, particularly in the context of broader geopolitical tensions and the EU's efforts to strengthen cohesion in its external relations.¹³

Having completed the initial procedural phase of opening negotiating chapters, Albania has now entered a more demanding stage of the accession process. Progress will increasingly be assessed on the basis of concrete results in the so-called "Fundamentals," which include the rule of law, democratic institutions, fundamental rights, and the fight against corruption and organised crime. The European Commission is currently evaluating whether the legislative reforms and policy measures adopted in recent months demonstrate tangible and sustainable progress in these core areas.¹⁴

In particular, the rule of law cluster, Cluster 1, also referred to as the "Fundamentals", remains decisive for the overall pace of negotiations. According to EU accession rules, no negotiation chapter can be provisionally closed until Albania meets the interim benchmarks set under Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security). These chapters address issues such as judicial independence, the protection of fundamental rights, border management, and the fight against organised crime, and therefore constitute the backbone of the EU's conditionality framework.¹⁵

Despite significant procedural progress, several structural and political challenges remain. EU officials have repeatedly expressed concern over the high level of political polarisation between the government and opposition, emphasising the need for a more inclusive and constructive political dialogue. Media freedom also continues to be identified as one of the weaker areas, particularly due to the concentration of media ownership and reports of political and economic pressure on journalists. At the same time, Albania has recorded progress in anti-corruption efforts, particularly through the work of the Special Structure against Corruption and Organised Crime (SPAK), which has launched a number of high-profile investigations. Nevertheless, EU institutions stress that sustained implementation and institutional

¹⁰ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report_en; <https://www.gov.me/en/european-integration>

¹¹ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/albania_en; <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/albania/>

¹² https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/policy-highlights/chapters-acquis_en; <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/>

¹³ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/albania_en

¹⁴ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report_en

¹⁵ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/policy-highlights/chapters-acquis_en

independence will be necessary to ensure that these reforms produce long-term and credible results.¹⁶

There are ongoing discussions in Brussels and Tirana regarding Albania's fulfillment of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance - IBAR conditions. If Albania successfully meets the required benchmarks already in the first half of 2026, it could open the path to closing the chapters very soon.

In a co-authored opinion piece published in the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić called for a new approach to EU enlargement that would allow prepared candidate countries to integrate more rapidly into the EU's single market and the Schengen area, even without immediately receiving full institutional rights within the Union. In an attempt to address concerns among some EU member states about decision-making efficiency in an enlarged Union, they suggested that candidate countries could temporarily forego certain institutional prerogatives, including veto rights or additional EU commissioners, while still benefiting from deeper economic integration. According to the proposal, such a phased model could strengthen both the geopolitical position of the EU and the economic prospects of the Western Balkans while avoiding institutional blockages that have often slowed the enlargement process.¹⁷

However, this phased approach carries inherent risks and could potentially undermine the EU's identity as a political, value-driven, and normative community. By granting candidate countries partial integration without full institutional participation, the Union might weaken the mechanisms designed to uphold democratic standards, the rule of law, and collective decision-making. While economically pragmatic, such a model could create precedents that challenge the EU's foundational principles, dilute member state accountability, and fuel perceptions of a two-tier Europe, where some countries enjoy market access without fully committing to or being bound by the Union's core values.

North Macedonia

North Macedonia is a candidate country for membership in the European Union. Until recently, it was considered one of the frontrunners in the Western Balkans enlargement process, even taking the extraordinary step of changing its name to resolve the long-standing dispute with Greece. As of early 2026, several chapters have been opened, but the country now faces significant delays in closing

them due to ongoing political reforms, alignment with EU requirements, and subsequent demands from Bulgaria, which have effectively stalled its EU trajectory. The European Commission has consistently highlighted the need for further improvements in areas such as judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, freedom of the media, and administrative capacity. Progress in these "fundamental" areas is considered critical for accelerating the accession process.¹⁸

A persistent challenge for North Macedonia has been political polarization and the effective functioning of democratic institutions. EU institutions have repeatedly called on Skopje to strengthen parliamentary procedures, enhance transparency in public administration, and ensure the independence of the judiciary. These domestic governance reforms are essential not only for technical alignment with the EU *acquis* but also for building public trust in the European integration process and ensuring that reforms are sustainable over the long term.

North Macedonia's EU accession prospects will depend on the country's ability to demonstrate tangible progress in implementing the fundamental reforms outlined by the European Commission. Continued efforts in the rule of law, democratic governance, public administration reform, and regional cooperation will be crucial to unlocking further negotiation chapters and ultimately achieving full EU membership. Political stability, institutional resilience, and alignment with EU foreign and security policies will remain decisive factors in maintaining the accession trajectory.

North Macedonia's European integration process continues to hinge on constitutional changes, particularly those related to the rights of minorities and communities, which the EU considers a fundamental prerequisite for advancing accession negotiations. On the domestic political scene, tensions between parties over responsibility and the country's strategic direction are deepening, with the issue of constitutional amendments becoming a focal point of political confrontation. The European Parliament rapporteur for North Macedonia, Thomas Waitz, reiterated in an interview that these constitutional changes are non-negotiable and essential for the country to start effective accession negotiations. Waitz emphasized that compliance with the European *acquis*, including minority rights protections, is a core requirement, and he highlighted that the process of harmonizing the parliamentary draft and amendments in the European Parliament has already begun, with deliberations expected to continue until May.¹⁹

A further challenge is the longstanding bilateral dispute with Bulgaria. Bulgaria has periodically blocked the

¹⁶ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report_en; <https://balkaninsight.com>

¹⁷ <https://vreme.com/en/vesti/vucic-i-rama-u-zajednickom-tekstu-pustite-nas-u-eu-i-bez-veta/>; <https://seenews.com/news/rama-vucic-offer-to-forego-veto-rights-in-move-to-speed-up-eu-integration-1290604>; <https://en.vijesti.me/world-a/balkan/798008/Vucic-and-Rama-are-seeking-admission-to-the-single-market-and-the-Schengen-zone-without-veto-rights-in-the-EU>

¹⁸ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report_en

¹⁹ <https://www.bgnnews.bg/en>

start of full EU accession negotiations due to concerns over historical interpretations, linguistic issues, and the protection of the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia's constitution. Although the 2019-2020 Framework Agreement between the two countries aimed to resolve these disputes, implementation has been slow, and Bulgaria has continued to link its support for North Macedonia's EU accession to the fulfillment of its demands. EU institutions have stressed that addressing Bulgaria's concerns is necessary to meet the Union's standards on minority protection and good-neighborly relations, making the bilateral dispute a critical precondition for progress in the accession negotiations.²⁰

A more nuanced reading of the enlargement process also requires acknowledging that bilateral disputes and identity-related questions have, at times, significantly shaped accession dynamics in ways that go beyond the formal criteria for EU membership. In this context, demands such as those raised by Bulgaria towards North Macedonia are widely perceived by observers as rooted in nationalist interpretations of history and identity, rather than in the established *acquis*-based conditionality framework. Moreover, credibility challenges have been compounded by earlier developments, including the EU's handling of commitments linked to North Macedonia's name change following the Prespa Agreement, which some stakeholders view as a precedent that has weakened trust in the enlargement process. These factors continue to influence domestic debates and public perceptions, underscoring the need for a more consistent, transparent, and politically balanced approach by the EU.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina currently holds the status of a candidate country for membership in the European Union and has received political approval to open accession negotiations. The decision by EU institutions to move forward with the negotiation framework marked an important step in the country's long and complex accession process. Developments throughout 2025 proved particularly significant, as Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted several reforms that the EU had been requesting for years, including legislation on border control and the protection of personal data. Although the adoption of the Reform Agenda was not formally a legal prerequisite for opening negotiations, it proved politically and financially decisive for restoring momentum in the country's EU path.²¹ However, it has not been implemented yet.

A major factor pushing domestic institutions to act was the temporary loss of access to approximately €108 million from the EU's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans due to delays in implementing agreed reforms. In response, BiH institutions in 2025 managed to consolidate political coordination and deliver several long-awaited legislative measures, which helped restore some degree of credibility in the country's EU integration process.²²

Despite these developments, several key reforms remain blocked and continue to delay the transition from the political decision to open negotiations to the substantive phase of the accession process. In particular, judicial reform remains one of the most critical outstanding conditions. The adoption of a new Law on the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council (HJPC) and the Law on the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina are widely considered essential steps for strengthening judicial independence, improving accountability, and aligning the country's institutional framework with EU standards. Without progress in these areas, Bosnia and Herzegovina will struggle to advance toward the next formal stage of negotiations.²³

In addition to legislative reforms, several institutional appointments necessary for managing the accession process are still pending political agreement. These include the appointment of the Chief Negotiator, the formation of a negotiation team, and the formal designation of the National IPA Coordinator (NIPAC), who is responsible for overseeing EU financial assistance and coordinating reform priorities. The absence of these institutional structures complicates preparations for the next phase of negotiations and slows down administrative readiness for the alignment of legislation with the EU *acquis*.²⁴

As of March 2026, the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina is actively working on adopting the remaining key documents and reforms required for the establishment of the official EU negotiation framework. The adoption of this framework represents a necessary precondition for convening the first Intergovernmental Conference (IGC), which formally launches accession negotiations between a candidate country and the EU. At the same time, Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to work on fulfilling the remaining priorities from the European Commission's Opinion on the country's membership application, particularly those related to judicial reform, the fight against corruption, and the strengthening of public administration.

Political dynamics, however, continue to hamper the pace of reforms. Rising tensions between political actors ahead of the 2026 general elections have contributed to delays

²⁰ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report_en; <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/north-macedonia-bulgaria-eu-accession-stalemate/>

²¹ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/bosnia-and-herzegovina_en; <https://radiosarajevo.ba/metromahala/ja-mislim/savez-kolumnista-evropski-trenutak-za-bih-2025-je-donijela-dokaz-sada-nam-treba-odlucnost/617791>

²² https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/bosnia-and-herzegovina_en

²³ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/bosnia-and-herzegovina-report_en

²⁴ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/bosnia-and-herzegovina_en

in adopting key legislation and institutional appointments. Such delays undermine not only the technical alignment with the EU acquis but also broader standards of governance, transparency, and institutional functionality that are central to the EU accession process. In parallel, discussions are ongoing regarding several practical issues affecting Bosnia and Herzegovina's relations with the EU, including the residence rights of Bosnian truck drivers within the EU and the implementation of the EU's new Entry/Exit System (EES), a digital border management system expected to begin operation in the near future.²⁵

Once the negotiation framework is formally adopted, Bosnia and Herzegovina will move into the screening phase of accession negotiations. This process involves a detailed analytical comparison of the country's legislation with the EU acquis and serves as the basis for opening individual negotiation chapters. The pace and credibility of this next phase will depend largely on whether domestic political actors can maintain reform momentum and deliver the institutional and legislative commitments that the EU continues to identify as prerequisites for meaningful progress in the accession process.²⁶

In parallel, the ratification of the Western Balkans Growth Plan agreement remains pending in the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina and in both houses of Parliament. Progress is expected to be challenging, given the complex political landscape, ongoing inter-entity disagreements, and heightened tensions ahead of the 2026 elections. This is compounded by the persistent obstruction from the ruling coalition in the entity of Republika Srpska (RS), whose resistance to key reforms and institutional appointments effectively blocks the implementation of the negotiation framework. As a result, the start of substantive accession talks is delayed, underscoring how entrenched domestic polarization, between pro-EU forces and pro-Russia factions, continues to be a critical obstacle to Bosnia and Herzegovina's European integration. Further delays in ratification could also impact the disbursement of pre-financing funds, highlighting the broader challenge of translating EU commitments into concrete domestic action.

Kosovo

Kosovo currently holds the status of a potential candidate for membership in the European Union and remains part of the broader EU enlargement framework for the Western Balkans. While the EU has repeatedly affirmed that Kosovo has a clear European perspective, its path toward full membership faces a number of political and legal challenges that make progress more complex than

in other candidate countries. Despite these obstacles, the relationship between Kosovo and the EU has gradually deepened over the past decade through political dialogue, economic cooperation, and institutional support.²⁷

Kosovo formally applied for EU membership on 15 December 2022, marking an important symbolic step in its European integration process.

Another milestone in EU–Kosovo relations was achieved in January 2024, when citizens of Kosovo gained visa-free travel to the Schengen Area for short stays. This long-awaited visa liberalisation represented one of the most tangible benefits of the EU integration process for Kosovo's population and was widely interpreted as recognition of the country's progress in areas such as border management, migration policy, and document security.²⁸

However, Kosovo's accession prospects continue to face structural obstacles within the EU itself. Five EU member states, Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Romania, and Greece, do not formally recognise Kosovo's independence. Because EU enlargement decisions require unanimity among all member states, this lack of recognition represents a significant political barrier to Kosovo obtaining full candidate status and advancing in the accession process.

In February 2026, Kosovo's Parliament ratified agreements with the EU, putting the country on track to receive €62 million from the Western Balkans Growth Plan through pre-financing. This payment is not conditional on fulfilling the steps outlined in Kosovo's Reform Agenda and is therefore considered certain. However, the next tranche of funds remains uncertain. If, within the next three months, the steps from the Reform Agenda that were originally scheduled for completion by June 2025 are not implemented, and for which the EU has effectively granted an additional 12-month grace period, part of the funds allocated to Kosovo could be reallocated to other countries in the region. This situation underscores the continued importance of timely reforms in areas such as governance, rule of law, and public administration for maintaining both financial support and credibility with EU institutions.²⁹ In March 2026, the European Commission lifted all previous financial restrictions on Kosovo, signaling renewed confidence in the country's reform efforts and a full re-engagement with its EU integration agenda. This step reflects a more constructive approach from Brussels and provides Kosovo with additional momentum in implementing its Reform Agenda and strengthening institutional capacities.

The normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia remains a critical factor for Kosovo's EU integration. The EU-facilitated dialogue continues to focus on the

²⁵ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/bosnia-and-herzegovina-report_en; https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen-borders-and-visa/smart-borders/entry-exit-system_en

²⁶ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/bosnia-and-herzegovina_en

²⁷ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/kosovo_en

²⁸ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/kosovo/eu-kosovo-relations_en

²⁹ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/kosovo-report_en; <https://www.newunionpost.com>

implementation of previously agreed arrangements, confidence-building measures, and practical cooperation between the two sides, though progress has often been slow and uneven. In this context, the appointment of Peter Sørensen as the new EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, succeeding Miroslav Lajčák, reflects an effort to reinvigorate a process that has lost momentum in recent years. Sørensen is expected to pursue an incremental approach centred on the implementation of agreements reached in Brussels and Ohrid, combined with confidence-building measures and renewed diplomatic engagement by EU member states. While progress continues to be monitored within European Union institutions, the effectiveness of this renewed mediation remains uncertain, and developments in the dialogue will continue to influence both Kosovo's and Serbia's prospects in the accession process.

The dialogue itself continues to face growing scrutiny within Kosovo. While the EU consistently calls for “tangible” progress, the process is often perceived as lacking consistency and impartial enforcement. This perception has been further reinforced by controversies surrounding former EU-appointed chief negotiators involved in the mediation process, including Federica Mogherini and Miroslav Lajčák.³⁰ Regardless of legal outcomes, such developments have contributed to a growing credibility gap, undermining trust in the integrity of the dialogue.

A central concern remains the perceived asymmetry of conditionality. Kosovo's progress in EU integration, membership in international organisations such as the Council of Europe, and broader international recognition continues to be closely tied to advancements in the dialogue, creating the impression that Kosovo's European path is disproportionately dependent on this process. In contrast, Serbia's obligations are often seen as less rigorously enforced, particularly regarding its commitment not to obstruct Kosovo's membership in international organisations. This imbalance has fueled perceptions of unequal treatment and weakened confidence in the EU's role as a neutral mediator.

To restore credibility and effectiveness, the EU will need to strengthen accountability mechanisms within the dialogue framework. This includes ensuring more consistent enforcement of commitments by both parties and demonstrating greater balance in its approach. Without such adjustments, the dialogue risks further erosion of trust, which could ultimately hinder both normalization efforts and the broader EU integration prospects of the region.

Serbia

Serbia has been engaged in accession negotiations with the European Union since 2014. Although Serbian authorities have repeatedly expressed the ambition to fulfil all accession criteria by 2026 or 2027, a more realistic timeframe for potential membership would be around 2029 or 2030, provided that the pace of reforms accelerates and outstanding political issues are addressed.³¹

Out of the 35 chapters, Serbia has so far opened 22, while only two chapters, Chapter 25 (Science and Research) and Chapter 26 (Education and Culture), have been provisionally closed. Despite earlier progress, the negotiation process has effectively stalled in recent years. Since December 2021, no new negotiation chapters have been opened, reflecting growing concerns within the EU regarding Serbia's progress in key reform areas and its geopolitical alignment with EU policies.³²

A number of critical challenges continue to shape Serbia's accession prospects. The most significant issue remains the normalization of relations with Kosovo, which is addressed within Chapter 35 of the negotiation framework. The EU considers progress in this area essential for Serbia's overall advancement in the accession process and expects full implementation of agreements reached through the EU-facilitated dialogue, including those concluded in Brussels and Ohrid. These agreements aim to stabilise relations and promote practical cooperation between the two sides, which Brussels views as a cornerstone of long-term regional stability.³³ Nevertheless, Serbia's continued position regarding Kosovo, including the non-recognition of its sovereignty, remains a significant source of tension and contributes to ongoing instability in the Western Balkans.

Another important issue concerns Serbia's alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. While most Western Balkan candidate countries have aligned themselves fully with EU foreign policy positions, Serbia has so far refused to introduce sanctions against Russia following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This divergence from EU foreign policy has become a major point of contention in the accession process and is frequently highlighted by EU institutions as a key indicator of Serbia's strategic orientation.³⁴

Beyond geopolitical alignment, the EU continues to emphasise the need for deeper reforms in the areas of rule of law, judicial independence, anti-corruption policies, and media freedom. Concerns about democratic backsliding, political polarisation, and the functioning of democratic institutions have also been raised in recent years. In

³⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cnvgjj1dygo>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/04/federica-mogherini-ex-eu-policy-chief-resigns-college-of-europe>

³¹ <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/analysis/eu-enlargement-western-balkans>;

³² https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/serbia_en

³³ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue_en

³⁴ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report_en

particular, tensions surrounding large public protests and political disputes following the roof collapse in Novi Sad in 2024, a disaster widely attributed to human-made failures and corruption, intensified domestic debates about governance, accountability, and institutional transparency. The incident underscored that corruption has tangible, often deadly consequences. Addressing these governance challenges remains essential for restoring momentum in Serbia's EU accession negotiations and rebuilding trust between Belgrade and Brussels.

In this context, the issue of judicial reforms has recently attracted additional scrutiny in Brussels. On 25 February, at the request of Germany, ambassadors of European Union member states held an extraordinary debate on the political and legal situation in Serbia following the adoption of new judicial laws, which the European Commission reportedly assessed as a significant step backwards in terms of rule-of-law standards. Although the meeting did not lead to formal decisions, several member states suggested that the possible suspension of funds from the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans should be considered if the legislation remains in force. At the same time, some diplomats welcomed Belgrade's readiness to refrain from implementing the laws until an opinion is issued by the Venice Commission, which is expected in June.³⁵

³⁵ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com>

Conclusion

Taken together, the EU accession trajectories of the Western Balkans Six illustrate a dual reality: while frontrunners such as Montenegro and Albania demonstrate tangible reform progress and strategic alignment with EU priorities, other candidates continue to face structural, political, and bilateral obstacles that slow their integration. North Macedonia's stalled chapters due to Bulgaria's demands, Bosnia and Herzegovina's domestic polarization and obstruction from the entity of Republika Srpska, Kosovo's recognition issues, and Serbia's misalignment with EU foreign policy all underscore the persistent tension

between ambition and implementation. The overarching thesis is clear: the success of EU enlargement in the region depends not only on technical reforms and legislative alignment but critically on resolving entrenched domestic and bilateral political disputes, strengthening democratic institutions, and maintaining consistent adherence to the EU's core values. Without addressing these systemic challenges, the Union risks prolonging uncertainty in the Western Balkans, undermining its own credibility as a values-driven, transformative actor in the region.

Key takeaways

→ **Renewed geopolitical momentum for EU enlargement:**

In the context of heightened geopolitical tensions and the war in Ukraine, EU enlargement has returned to the strategic agenda in Brussels. The European Commission's upcoming pre-enlargement policy reviews and discussions on institutional reforms demonstrate that the EU is increasingly preparing itself politically, institutionally, and financially for a potential new wave of enlargement.

→ **Uneven progress among Western Balkan candidates:**

Montenegro and Albania currently stand out as the most advanced countries in the accession process, showing tangible progress in negotiations and reforms. In contrast, other countries face structural or political obstacles, including institutional gridlock in Bosnia and Herzegovina, normalization challenges between Serbia and Kosovo, and Bulgaria's unilateral demands affecting North Macedonia's path.

→ **Gradual integration models gaining attention:**

Within EU policy debates, new ideas are emerging about how to integrate candidate countries more gradually into EU structures before full membership. Proposals such as phased access to the single market, participation in EU programmes, or limited institutional rights reflect a growing search for flexible approaches that could accelerate integration while safeguarding the EU's decision-making capacity.

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Western Balkans and the EU: Keeping the Promise, Finishing the Job

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Further information on this topic can be found here:

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