



# **ACCESSION BEFORE MEMBERSHIP: boosting South East Europe 6 all-sector alignment with EU**

*a Tirana Connectivity Forum 2024 Report*

December 2024

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## About the content

The report is composed by two parts. In the first part, authors present a concrete proposal that enriches the current debate on how Enlargement can proceed by adapting to the needs of SEE6, and to the developments impacting EU. In the second part we have summarized the proceedings of TCF24 including presentations, panel discussions, Q&A and the recommendations.

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## IMPRINT

### About the Tirana Connectivity Forum (TCF)

Tirana Connectivity Forum is the only such event covering connectivity, reforms and enlargement in the South East Europe region (SEE6). The Forum is the annual European benchmark that gathers stakeholders from think tanks to policy-makers involved in EU Enlargement, Regional Cooperation and Connectivity dynamics impacting the Balkans peninsula. TCF aims to create a critical mass of knowledge on the means, resources, mechanisms and impact of multi-layered connectivity in relation to growth, development, reforms, regional cooperation and the convergence of the SEE6 with the European Union. TCF publishes the annual Tirana Connectivity Forum Paper.

### About the Tirana Connectivity Forum Report

Since its first edition in 2015, TCF in collaboration with its partners regularly publishes the Tirana Connectivity Forum Report which contributes to creating actionable knowledge on the Berlin Process, connectivity, regional cooperation and Enlargement. This document serves as a link and knowledge transmission vector from one Summit to the next. The publication provides a balanced mix of TCF proceedings and of its main conclusions complemented with innovative insights, research products and arguments on interactions between multi-layered connectivity and development, reforms and regional cooperation. Its main contribution is to provide innovative and impact-oriented scenarios for ever stronger linkages and speedier convergence of SEE6 with EU.

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## PART I

### ACCESSION BEFORE MEMBERSHIP:

boosting South East Europe 6 all-sector alignment with EU

## Abstract

The EU's Enlargement into South East Europe 6<sup>1</sup> (SEE6) is back on the agenda, with 2030 identified as the target date for the next wave. This timeline puts into focus the preparedness of both the candidate countries and the EU itself.

At the same time, EU discussions on the future of its Cohesion policy are intensifying, with conditionality being the main debating argument. Any changes to the Cohesion policy will directly impact the EU's policy on Competitiveness.

The 2020 revised Enlargement Methodology offers to SEE6 countries enhanced avenues for 'gradual integration' into selected EU policies already before membership. The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans follows this logic by frontloading certain benefits and obligations mainly connected to the Single Market.

Building on the EU Single Market alignment example, other EU instruments and programs should be extended to Western Balkans wherever feasible, boosting region's efforts for an all-sector alignment with EU in line with gradual accession approach. The next step should involve integrating the region into the ongoing EU policy discussions process on the future of Cohesion and Competitiveness policies.

The "Accession before Membership" (AbM) approach prioritizes the region's convergence with the EU by promoting early access of SEE6 into EU policy-making, giving it equal importance alongside the adoption of the *acquis* and the strengthening of institutions. Grounded in ownership and in learning by doing ethos, AbM enhances preparedness of both EU and SEE6 for post-membership, while practically contributing to European cohesion, competitiveness and resilience.

In their current stage of advancement towards EU membership, SEE6 are both beneficiaries and contributors to the Union's prosperity, security, and resilience.

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<sup>1</sup> South East Europe 6 – SEE6 covers Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia



## I. Expanding the Scope of Accelerated Integration

The EU's Enlargement is back on the agenda, with 2030 suggested as the possible date for the next wave. The debate on the number of new members varies from two front-runners to all six Western Balkans, or even to a big bang of nine countries (including Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine). Given the timeline, the scale of potential new members, and the significant convergence gap between them and the EU, the next enlargement will require a coherent approach that links EU pre-accession instruments supporting the candidate countries to the reform of EU own policies and of respective financial instruments.

The accelerated integration approach aims to move beyond a strict in-or-out model by offering various levels of integration that grant specific and additional benefits to Candidate Countries, contingent on meeting set conditions. The potential impact on the EU would necessitate adjustments to its political decision-making processes, to its policies and to respective financial instruments and programs.

The EU's internal debate on Cohesion and Competitiveness are now closely interlinked with the next wave of Enlargement. Regardless of the number of new members in 2030, their eventual membership will need to be accounted for in the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028 – 2034. Candidates' preparedness to meet membership obligations and avoid back-sliding, alongside lessons learnt from the previous Enlargement waves, must be taken into account in the ongoing EU planning process.

The 2030 target date brings in focus the strategic importance of the pre-accession period for the SEE6 convergence. However, current pre-accession instruments are not designed to directly address convergence in that span of time. Moreover, as EU policies on Cohesion and Competitiveness are evolving, SEE6 preparedness efforts resemble like hitting a moving target.

The [EC communication on EC communication on Pre-Enlargement policy reviews and reform](#) underlines the necessity for future EU policies to be programmed with Enlargement in mind. The Enlargement Solidarity Facility mentioned in the [Letta report, embodies this principle](#). Accession before Membership (AbM) concept operationalises this necessity by [frontloading EU Cohesion](#) and Competitiveness Policies into Enlargement - before SEE6 formal membership to EU.

AbM envisages coopting wherever possible the SEE6 in EU policies, instruments and programs before the countries become EU members. This all-sector alignment of the region with EU policy-making cycle reinforces the implementation of SEE6 reform agenda in all sectors and in their respective internal governance levels, all by consolidating national institutions and structures preparing them to meet upcoming membership requirements.

## II. Accession Before Membership Methodology

The Growth Plan for Western Balkans is a clear response to the increasing importance of convergence with the EU as an Enlargement priority, alongside adopting the *acquis* and

institution strengthening . Accession before Membership (AbM) builds on this shift by advocating for the early access of SEE6 into EU policy-making, with focus on region's full alignment with Single Market, Cohesion and Competitiveness policies.

In that angle, AbM dedramatizes the Enlargement by considering the full membership as only a station in the SEE6 road to EU. This approach acknowledges the region's current economic integration into the EU, its ever-increasing adoption of the *acquis*, and the value of pre-accession period in enhancing SEE6 actors' preparedness for the post-membership responsibilities. It also valorises, capitalizes and builds upon SEE6 place-based comparative advantages.

AbM methodology is based on four constataions:

1. SEE6 region is de-facto part of the Union, on the account of its economic integration, infrastructure connectivity, alignment in norms, standards, legal frameworks, values, and of geography (i.e. being surrounded by member states);
2. There are no legal barriers to include SEE6 into the planning and implementation of EU policy-making cycle across many sectors. Relevant EU programs<sup>2</sup> and respective instruments<sup>3</sup> in the field of Single Market, Cohesion policy<sup>4</sup>, Industrial policy or Green Transition are open to candidate countries even as they continue their reform and negotiation processes to become full members;
3. Extending certain EU policies, instruments, and programs to SEE6 before region's full membership contributes in the ongoing debate on the EU's absorption capacity or on its internal reform;
4. SEE6 region already contributes to the Union's prosperity, resilience and security.

Accession before Membership approach is designed with the convergence criteria in mind. It seeks to harness the benefits of good governance dividend from SEE6 earlier participation in EU governance system, offering a proactive response to an ever faster changing world.

### III. Benefits of Pre-accession participation in EU Cohesion policy

Technological advancements, geopolitical tensions and the twin transition to a green and digital economy pose significant challenges to the current model of Enlargement, which emphasizes legislative alignment and institutional building, supported by strong Conditionality.

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<sup>2</sup> For the MFF 2021 – 2027 Albania already participates in EU Single Market Programme, Horizon Europe, Cooperation in the field of customs (CUSTOMS), and in Cooperation in the field of taxation (FISCALIS). Under certain conditions SEE6 can also participate in certain strands of EU Cohesion policies (INTERREG).

<sup>3</sup> The extension of TEN-T Core Network in SEE6 created the basis for mobilising EU financial support through [Connecting Europe Facility \(CEF\)](#).

<sup>4</sup> As part of EU Cohesion policy, [INTERREG](#) promoting regional development, cohesion, and reducing economic disparities. For the 2021-2027 period, Interreg is focused on addressing current challenges like climate change, digital transformation, and social inclusion also covering SEE6 region via INTERREG IPA.

Built upon a reinforced three-level conditionality, the Growth Plan acknowledges the need for deeper convergence. But its financial provisions – EUR 2 bn in grants and EUR 4bn in loans over three years – fall short of addressing SEE6 convergence needs. The Reform and Growth Facility financial instrument remains a top down instrument.

Finally, although aiming speedier convergence, Growth Plan lacks sufficient emphasis on solidarity and partnership principles. It appears to be a more conditionality-heavy iteration of the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA), without adequately addressing the future role of IPA itself. With [EUR 14,162 bn in grants for the period 2021-2027, the IPA](#) remains by far most relevant instrument supporting SEE6 Enlargement.

### III.1. Convergence boost

The early and gradual access to the EU Single Market (SM) has become a key dimension of the Enlargement policy. Focusing on the SEE6 convergence with the EU, it consists mainly in adopting the SM *acquis* and in preparing and “certifying” local institutions to enforce the EU SM stringent standards.

SEE6 candidate and potential candidate countries can already [participate in selected strands of EU Single Market Programme](#), even if they still rely on the IPA financing instrument to cover the cost of their “entry ticket”.

In the EU, growth and infrastructure are supported by Cohesion policies and structural funds. In SEE6, IPA instrument is not designed or adapted to region’s convergence needs neither by budget, nor by methodology. It prioritizes technical assistance over investments, favours loans over grants for infrastructure projects, and lacks emphasis on partnership and territorial development principles.

The recently adopted Growth Plan (GP) is designed to support SEE6 convergence with the EU. Beyond reforms, the GP focuses primarily on: i) SEE6 access to Single Market; ii) regulatory convergence of the region with EU; and, iii) connectivity infrastructure mainly in energy, transport and digital. But well beyond EU financial contribution, it is the Reform and Growth Facility (RGF) disbursement methodology and the engagement of EU institutions and SEE6 actors in every governance level that make the difference in the pre-accession period.

However, unlike the EU Cohesion policy, the Growth Plan does not address potential negative externalities: i.e. “inequalities” or “market fragmentation” that may increase and / or arise by the eventual early access of SEE6 to the EU Single Market.

Being part of EU Cohesion policy mechanisms and accessing its toolbox offers a “good governance dividend” for preparing SEE6 institutions for full membership obligations. Early integration into these mechanisms can significantly enhance governance, accelerating SEE6's path toward EU convergence.

### III.2. Enhanced Preparedness

The early involvement of SEE6 actors in the EU Cohesion policy ecosystem helps the candidate countries become familiar with the objectives, methodology and procedures of the Structural Funds. This approach reduces the need for lengthy transition periods after accession and minimises the risk of back-sliding.

Today's Connectivity Agenda, Economic and Investment Plan, and Growth Plan can be considered as structural pre-accession instruments, aligning SEE6 infrastructures with EU standards, particularly in the domains of transport, energy or environment. Similar to how the Cohesion fund supports EU Member States, these mechanisms also introduce applicant countries to the implementing procedures used by Structural Funds.

However, the IPA programme, while funding certain structural measures, lacks the Structural Funds specific working methods. With governance that relies almost exclusively on the candidate / applicant for candidate country executive branch, IPA does not empower regional and local authorities, economic partners, businesses or other organisations to play a significant role. The recently introduced Operational Programmes under IPA III in Albania also fall short of establishing partnership-based structures that ensure the involvement of local and regional authorities, as well as of social and economic actors, in the various stages of programme management. It remains to be seen if Growth Plan governance, including its GP Monitoring Committee, will upgrade and incorporate the best practices and methodologies of the Structural Funds.

A tangible advantage to be expected from earlier application of EU Cohesion policy mechanisms in SEE6, would be the preparation of Candidate Countries institutions for the full EU obligations well before they become members. This readiness would help mitigate many post-accession challenges and problems related to EU fund absorption, implementation and reporting, which posed significant issues during the last enlargement wave. More importantly, it will equip SEE6 institutions with the skills, structures, and protocols necessary to face EU pressures from the outset of membership, across all levels of governance.

The earlier full participation of SEE6 actors in EU Cohesion policies and programs, is expected to enhance their preparedness and readiness for future integration.

### III.3. Application of Multi-layered conditionality

At the policy-making level, the current debate in Brussels regarding the new Cohesion policy focusses on a divide: some Member States (MS) advocate for Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)-like conditionality, akin to the SEE6 Growth Plan conditionality mentioned earlier. Others - mainly from Central, Eastern and Southern Europe - seek to preserve the existing principles and allocation rules for Cohesion Funds.

Regardless of the direction the new EU Cohesion policy will take, the application in SEE6 of EU programmes and corresponding implementation and enforcement mechanisms

during the pre-accession period introduces the most robust form of EU conditionality possible across any layer of SEE6 institutions.

As previously noted when presenting in the “good governance dividend”, early alignment with EU Cohesion policy will help applicant countries adopt essential EU principles and procedures, such as complementarity, concentration, programming, and accountability. It will drive them to adjust their financial management practices, including public procurement, financial control, evaluation, and auditing. In practice, this would allow EU conditionality to permeate every institutional level in Candidate Countries and complementing the top-down IPA approach.

#### III.4. Recalibrating EU Financial instruments

No authoritative assessment has been made yet on the investment needed for SEE6 to fully integrate into the EU Single Market. However, it is clear is that the current form and funding of the IPA are insufficient to cover those costs.

Enters the Growth Plan with its focus on convergence and support to Single Market access. Built upon on the example of NextGeneration EU Recovery and Resilience Facility, the Reform and Growth Facility can serve as an intermediary stage between the current IPA framework and the future EU assistance aimed at supporting SEE6 convergence with EU.

The debate on the future of Enlargement, on the new Cohesion policy, and on broader EU policies and reforms has already started. Given the 2030 target, the SEE6 voice should be represented and heard in the EU institutional debates. This is all the more important as it directly impacts the preparation for the new 2028-2034 Multi-Annual Financial Framework.

As previously mentioned, the application during the pre-accession period of EU programmes and of respective implementation and enforcement mechanisms (i.e. in the last years of current MFF 2021 – 2027 and early years of MFF 2028 – 2034) should not impact the current EU Cohesion budget. Meanwhile, IPA and the Growth Plan can be recalibrated and adapted to address SEE6’s convergence, preparedness and reform agenda needs.

This recalibration process can start immediately by shaping the composition of Growth Plan Monitoring Committee based on the partnership principle and on best practices for similar Cohesion instruments’ governance structures. Additionally, actively involving territorial and social actors into infrastructure project cycle financed by IPA or Growth Plan along the lines of EU’s Cohesion policy multi-level governance practices, would be another strategic step forward.

Access before membership of SEE6 actors in EU Cohesion mechanisms and programs should not impact the amounts dedicated to EU member states. Under the new MFF 2028–2034, IPA funding earmarked for supporting growth and convergence in SEE6 (e.g., access to the single market, social and economic development, infrastructure development) can be grouped in a dedicated EU Cohesion budget envelope exclusively designated and earmarked for SEE6 — similar to the ISPA (Instrument for Structural Pre-

Accession). The disbursement of this “convergence envelope” can follow exactly the same procedures as the EU Cohesion funds earmarked for respective EU programmes. This scheme is already applied for INTERREG-IPA program of EU Cohesion policy. The “convergence envelope” mechanism will be functional until SEE6 became full EU members and can benefit from regular EU Cohesion funds.

Earlier access of SEE6 actors to EU Cohesion policy toolbox creates the conditions for sustainable, long-term growth in the region all by improving region’s and EU’s competitiveness. Moreover, cohesion policy spillovers contribute to regional cooperation and to a more cohesive SEE6 region, reinforcing Common Regional Market (CRM) dynamics and valorising CRM achievements.

Including the region into Cohesion policy mechanism, instruments and programs is expected to further improve cross-border cooperation, strengthen governance capacities at all levels and ensure that SEE6 local government voices are heard in Brussels.

#### IV. Turning the Tables: SEE6 contribution to EU Competitiveness

SEE6 is more than just a regional market of 17 million customers, or a group of countries with an EU vocation; it is also a region with distinct comparative advantages that can contribute to European competitiveness in concrete ways. These advantages lie in its strategic location, in its endowment in resources, in its people and in its alignment with EU rule of law standards.

In the last decade, [the SEE6 accumulated trade deficit with the EU has surpassed one hundred billion euro](#). A significant part of EU-SEE6 trade includes intermediary goods which are moved within value-producing chains of EU businesses. We posit that beside this advanced integration on the demand side, the SEE6 supply side and further inclusion of region’s industry in EU supply chain present a tangible and immediate interest for European competitiveness and its strategic autonomy. Already EU businesses have set up many production facilities in the SEE6. As such the region must be included in respective EU strategies and policy-making measures.

Strong industrial capabilities have proven essential in times of crisis where countries with robust manufacturing sectors were better equipped to navigate economic disruptions. SEE6 region being small and embedded in EU economy, it is natural that its industrial policy should fit to EU’s.

It is also in the interest of EU to count on SEE6 industrial offer. In a world ever more separated in trading blocks integrating SEE6 production capacity into EU trade flux and supply chains adds to EU weight [in the global industrial production](#). Additionally, including SEE6 in EU industrial policy practically helps the block better face the impact of climate change, geopolitical instability, and any global crisis such as the pandemic.

To present some SEE6 place-based comparative advantages, we have used the overall megatrends reshaping today’s industry i.e. i) energy and the green transition; ii) rise of AI and the digitalization of production; iii) Global Value Chain reconfiguration; and, iv)

demographic changes and migration. As those megatrends affect both EU and SEE6 we have built upon the sector categorization of [Draghi report](#).

In the array of assessment and proposals advanced in the Draghi report, we have identified components, processes, sub-sectors or supply-chain links where SEE6 holds a comparative advantage potential for European industry and have illustrated them with additional information drawn from industry sources. In certain sectors we have provided examples and advanced recommendations.

This list is by no means exhaustive. Its goal is to bring the added value of some SEE6 place-based resources to the attention of European policy-makers, of businesses and of other relevant European stakeholders.

#### IV.1. Energy

Due to its geographic location SEE6 contributes to European energy interconnectedness, to fluidification of electricity and gas transit, to elimination of bottlenecks on natural gas and power interconnections in surrounding Member States, to diversification of EU energy supply, as well as by offering additional natural gas storages.

SEE6 inclusion in EU TEN-E optimizes EU energy supply, reduces price variations and flux congestion as well as minimizes related risks across MS surrounding the region. Further integration of SEE6 energy regulators into the governance of EU Single Market for Energy may be a low hanging fruit in this sector.

Lastly, SEE6 countries have shown interest in [building up stakes in large and complex projects on clean power generation](#) facilities<sup>5</sup> implemented in neighbouring EU Member States. This development is not new – [Albania and Italy](#) have touched the subject of a joint endeavour together since 2008. Properly planned, financed, implemented and operated this kind of collaboration contributes to cover the eventual EU MS project financial needs as well as further greens, diversifies and securitises the SEE6 own energy supply.

#### IV.2. Critical Raw Materials

SEE6 can help in increasing and diversifying the available EU Critical Raw Materials (CRM) supply, strengthening supply chains, or mitigating risks resulting from sustained higher prices and volatility. The region is rich in CRM - Serbia hosts one of the [largest lithium deposits in Europe](#); in BiH a [1.5 million metric tons of lithium carbonate equivalent](#) deposit has been discovered in 2023; while Kosovo, North Macedonia and Albania have large proven reserves of nickel and cobalt.

Including SEE6 in EU CRM strategies, policy-making and respective instruments will contribute to a lower EU dependence on mining and refining, and to the increase of EU share in CRM global production (currently SEE6 has 10 mineral deposits in nickel-cobalt while EU has 25 and possesses world-scale proven lithium reserves).

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<sup>5</sup> Currently, around 70 % of the energy in the region is produced from coal (with Albania as a notable exception)

Of interest is the inclusion of SEE6 in the European strategy(ies) that covers the entire CRM value chain – from mining to final products. At the same time SEE6 actors should be encouraged to apply for [EU Strategic Projects status under Critical Raw Materials Act](#).

### IV.3. Digitalisation and Advanced Technologies

SEE6 can contribute to Europe's Digitalisation and Advanced Technologies (DAT) competitiveness strategy for the forthcoming decade, by: i) bringing in its human capital, talent and expertise in Computing and A.I. - many SEE6 talents figure among successful entrepreneurs in US (OpenAI) or in EU ([iGenius](#)); and, ii) fill in certain spots in electronic and semiconductor supply chain such as in design, packaging and assembly (currently outsourced to East Asia).

Due to its geographical location, the region is strategically positioned along vital information routes connecting the South, East, Europe, and the Atlantic – vital for EU member countries aiming to [become data hubs \(such as Italy\)](#). The region can host a [resilient, high-speed and low-latency connection between south-east and western Europe](#), sorely needed in the continent's network infrastructure for more than two decades.

Another contribution is the [high-capacity point-to-point underwater fibre-optic cable linking Egypt to Albania](#) which will provide a different transit passage compared to the already existing Mediterranean routes to the main internet Point of Presence (PoP) in Frankfurt, Sofia, Vienna, and Budapest.

### IV.4. Energy Intensive Industries

SEE6 can bring in a greener energy mix and lower material costs as compared to EU's, especially for mineral and basic-metal industries' outputs destined for neighbouring EU countries. The introduction of CBAM in 2026 may initially penalize SEE6 Energy Intensive Industries producers, while at the same time make the case for an acceleration of green energy investment in the region.

However, any investment in Energy Intensive Industries (EII) in the region must take into account the current situation of Rule of Law and the normative applicable context, as well as the good governance situation of local monitoring, controlling and enforcing institutions. Further investment in EII should also be in full respect to Chapter 27 "Environment and Climate Change" and be accompanied with the necessary support from applicable EU relevant policies and financial instruments.

Counting on a potentially abundant and stable supply of cheap low-emission energy, SEE6 are a competitive location for the establishment of green regional industrial clusters around the EU's EII's.



#### IV.5. Green technologies

Due to lower operating and capital-cost, SEE6 can become a competitive destination for EU companies that are cutting their production in the EU and / or relocating to other world regions with lower production costs. Bringing their production facilities in SEE6 directly contributes to products, services and processes that use fewer resources and have a minimal impact on the environment and to the society compared to traditional technologies.

SEE6 can produce different parts of the EU supply chain, adapted to their place-based comparative advantage (e.g. resource availability, lower cost-structure, optimal connectivity, refining or manufacturing infrastructure presence, etc) all by being part of EU-certified standards on environmental footprint, labour rights, cybersecurity and data security.

#### IV.6. Automotive

SEE6 region offers an already established production matrix and proven track record of automotive production facilities, services and processes, that are well embedded in the European supply chain. The long-term region's experience in industrial manufacturing; its emerging local sub-contractors network; increased factor mobility within intra-SEE6 borders due to progress in regional cooperation; improved connectivity within the region, and of the region with the EU; and, the recent foray by world-standard companies in R&D activities on both software and hardware product development, on IT and on shared services, make the region an attractive location for the EU automotive sector.

SEE6 should be accounted for in any pan-European industrial strategy and / or EU automotive companies' strategic plans to be able to benefit from the region's comparative advantages in certain stages of automotive value chain such as in mining, supplying raw materials, refining or manufacturing.

#### IV.7. Defence

Geopolitically Europe is a de-facto unified security area. Acknowledging the mutual dependency, SEE6 – EU Security and Defence Partnerships ( EU – Albania SDP was adopted in November 2024) outline common actions to jointly address the risks that both EU and SEE6 country face.

In the economic layer, the SEE6's complementarity to the EU defence industry based on certain niche-specialisation, can be a source of resilience when the Europe's defence industry is viewed as a whole. Additionally, SEE6 - EU demand aggregation for defence assets and / or collaborative procurement of defence equipment – at least for the SEE6 NATO members, – can contribute to secure favourable financial terms and conditions, which are essential for strengthening Europe's industrial capacities.

#### IV.8. Pharma

Demand for affordable medicines is growing, especially as global supply chains face disruptions. Covid 19 exposed Europe's reliance on everyday medicines from India and

China. Geopolitical, environmental and market shocks has led [EU countries](#) to call for “reshoring” the production of essential medicines.

In a sector of critical importance, SEE6 can bolster the resilience of EU pharmaceutical supply chains by mitigating shortages of critical medicines, most of which are off-patent (generics account for [70 percent of all drugs sold in Europe](#), and for 9 out of 10 critical medicines); strengthening supply resilience; or becoming a destination of near-shoring through the development of new pharma productions sites.

#### IV.9. Transport

SEE6 transport network connects Adriatic Sea with the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean with the Central Europe and the North Sea. Surrounded by EU member countries SEE6 transport connectivity contributes to quicker, safer and cheaper EU access to goods, resources and services<sup>6</sup>. Geopolitically, it directly contributes to EU security, and to the defence and military mobility in continent’s southern flank. The unique expertise that EU has gained in SEE6 with the Connectivity Agenda since 2015 and with the Economic and Investment plan, can be adapted, upgraded and embedded into EU’s Global Gateway.

Currently EU financial support to SEE6 transport infrastructure is canalised through Western Balkans Investment Framework – a blending facility that brings together EU grants (from IPA and the Growth Plan) and International Finance Institutions loans to co-finance infrastructure. SEE6 can also access INTERREG cross border programs for small cross-border projects, and Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) under certain conditions.

An additional win-win scenario can be to encourage EU companies to engage with SEE6 through public-private partnership (PPP) financing models, such as build-operate-transfer agreements, especially for large infrastructure projects. Albania is specifically suited for this kind of partnership given the significant amount of ongoing and planned PPP targeting the country’s infrastructure development.

#### IV.10. Food Security and Agro processing

The climate in the WB is ideal for agricultural production. Fruit is the most competitive group of agriculture products, while countries located more southward from the largest EU markets are particularly suitable to produce high added value primeur vegetables.

Endowed with favourable conditions. Serbia<sup>7</sup> is competitive in cereals and industrial crops, while Kosovo and North Macedonia have abundant arable land suitable for cereal production; Albania and North Macedonia offer high added value fruits and vegetables.

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<sup>6</sup> the completion of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) – where SEE6 is part of since 2024 – is expected to bring an annual GDP increase of EUR 467 billion in 2050 for the EU

<sup>7</sup> By the end of 2024, Serbia’s corn export estimation stands at 2.6 million worth over \$620 million making the country one of the leading European corn exporters; at <https://www.world-grain.com/articles/19949-serbia-wheat-ending-stocks-remain-high>

SEE6 geographical position and its relief offer essential resources such as water (Albania, Montenegro and BiH) and high sun exposure time necessary for high added value primeur agriculture products. Local agro-industries have the potential to efficiently use this potential, enhance food availability, enrich its variety, and generate local jobs.

The SEE6 modern transport infrastructure and better integration of region's food and agro-processing into EU value chains will not only contribute to the securitisation of EU food supply, but also will further valorise the European unique blend of high quality and food diversity offer in the world market.

## V. Reflection scenarios

The inclusion of SEE6 into the EU's near shoring approach has been brought to the fore by Covid-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Production in Europe is now a key priority.

Along with geopolitical developments, there is a growing need to ensure an efficient, cost-effective and rapid production and supply; to optimise and stabilise supply chains; to reduce the carbon footprint and environmental impact; and to bring the production closer to the European market. [SEE6 offers](#) such advantages as well as a qualified workforce, competitive labour costs, reduced dependency on Asia, low energy prices, political stability and strategic alignment with EU, reduction of carbon emissions, and available renewable energy sources, all of which make it an attractive option for near shoring.

The future comparative advantages will depend on how goods and services are produced, with pollution being a significant cost factor. The availability of renewable energy sources and the progress in decarbonisation and in implementation of EU environment standards are directly linked to the cost structure as they contribute to the visibility, tracing and compatibility of SEE6 produced goods.

The withdrawal of multilateralism and the emergence of trading blocks, renders necessary the protection of European domestic industry. An EU coordination at regional level is required to limit intra-regional fragmentation and support regional centers of excellence.

To that end, the EU industrial policy coordination at the regional level is crucial. To minimize redundancies in production capacity and improve return on investment for state support, SEE6 should align the design and implementation of its industrial policy measures with EU, focusing on targeted sectors, policy tools, and the scale of such interventions. The EU must create the space and provide support to such an endeavour. By virtue of its full membership vocation and its current embedment in EU economic system, SEE6 should become part of any EU policy that supports cross-border regional value chains, the development of new manufacturing facilities or job training programmes.

The European industrial policy must include SEE6 as both a destination and an actor engaged in key technologies of tomorrow. SEE6 should be fully incorporated into the EU policy-making process, benefiting from EU instruments and participating in related programs. The ever-increasing adoption of *acquis* on EU Single market, on green

transition or on the social achievements creates a natural continuum between EU and the region. The inclusion of SEE6 in the Important Projects of Common Interests would be the next welcome step.

## VI. Conclusion

The EU has successfully managed previous enlargements, considering them as a [“geostrategic investment that increases EU’s political and economic weight on the global stage”](#). This was achieved by adjusting EU policies ahead of accession; by a rigorous accession process ensuring enlargement countries are fully prepared in advance of accession; and, through targeted assistance.

Accession before Membership for SEE6 follows the same logic. It applies wherever possible EU policies, instruments and programs to SEE6, before membership; ii) maintains a rigorous accession process through multilayered conditionality; iii) recalibrates EU assistance by prioritising good governance, cohesion and competitiveness; and, iv) valorises SEE6 place-based advantages for a win-win outcome.

Most importantly it does so by fully using the potential of existing EU legal instruments, as well as not impacting the existing EU budget allocations.

The 2020 revised Enlargement Methodology offers to candidate countries and potential candidates enhanced avenues for ‘gradual integration’ into selected EU policies, already before their accession, by frontloading certain benefits and obligations of EU membership. Building on the EU Single Market alignment example, other EU instruments and programs should be extended to Western Balkans wherever feasible, boosting region’s efforts for an **all-sector alignment** with EU in line with gradual accession approach.

An early and gradual SEE6 access to the EU Cohesion Policy toolbox before full EU membership will enhance region’s preparedness, promote a speedier SEE6 convergence and reinforce EU conditionality.

Including the region in the EU Competitiveness strategy will contribute to Europe’s strategic autonomy, directly benefit many EU sectors and economic actors, and reinforce SEE6 economy further anchoring it to EU’s. In many sectors, the region offers an array of place-based comparative advantages that are extremely valuable in the volatile world of today. In practical terms, EU industry will benefit by establishing more regionalized supply chains that use shorter, more cost-effective and less polluting transport routes. On the other side, SEE6 needs EU market size to justify much needed large-scale investments in industrial production and technological upgrading.

With 2030 in mind, the time is ripe to integrate the EU Enlargement for SEE6 into the EU’s internal policy-making cycle. The post-membership transitional phase should be complemented by an active phasing-in accession period.

## Part II

TCF24 proceedings

Better Together: Building a resilient Europe

## TCF24 concept

Tirana Connectivity Forum 2024 (TCF24) took place on 10 and 11 of September 2024 under the auspices of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Albania and was part of the official calendar of the Hungarian Presidency of the EU Council.

As the 10th TCF edition concurred with the 10th anniversary of the Berlin Process, it both took stock of one decade of Berlin Process in connectivity and regional cooperation and placed its discussions in the framework of EU Enlargement in Western Balkans.

TCF debates aim to tackle the EU Connectivity Trilemma, defined as the ability to navigate three different and sometimes competing objectives of: i) EU geo-political imperatives; ii) assuring financial viability of EU-supported projects; and, iii) supporting local development in the beneficiary country.

TCF2024 consisted of the following main topics:

- Increasing private sector footprint into the connectivity landscape
- Role of South East Europe as a Security Provider in Europe with focus on connectivity infrastructure
- Single Market and regional cooperation
- Reviewing EU accession policy toolbox

TCF2024 introduced a “Forum of Forums” format – an innovative event that brought together colleagues from sister forums in Budapest, Prague, Burgas and Bled to share their valuable assessment on subjects pertaining to their specific Forum profile, and provided a polyvalent picture of emerging trends that are projected to shape EU-Western Balkans relations.

Taking into account the geopolitical consequences of the war in Ukraine, a specific attention was also paid to security and resilience features of SEE6 Accession process.



## Day 1 | 10 September 2024

The first day of the TCF24 covered Enlargement process and the Hungarian Presidency priorities; latest developments on EU engagement with WB6 CSO to boost transparency, accountability and legitimacy in view of Accelerated Integration; the Berlin Process and preparations for the 10th Berlin Process Summit; the need for an increased role for social partners in the Growth Plan, and for an accelerated integration through Single Market and Cohesion Policy.

In his opening speech, Albanian Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs **Igli Hasani** stated that as a committed NATO member and EU candidate, Albania exemplifies the importance of strategic priorities like Euro-Atlantic integration. Regional connectivity – spanning transport, energy, digital infrastructure, and people-to-people exchanges – is critical for fostering economic growth, enhancing security, and strengthening resilience. Initiatives like the Berlin Process and the Western Balkans' integration into EU frameworks, including the Common Regional Market and Green Deal, are transformative pathways for convergence, prosperity, and solidarity within Europe. He also emphasized that the path to EU membership for Western Balkan countries necessitates a balance of solidarity and conditionality. Albania advocates for robust economic cooperation and development to bridge disparities with the EU, as seen in efforts like the Economic and Investment Plan and projects such as Corridor 8 and the TAP pipeline. Emphasizing regional stability, cohesion, and accelerated integration mechanisms, the Berlin Process must evolve with improved governance and delivery. The region's alignment with EU standards and its role in European geopolitics reaffirm that a united, connected Europe is better positioned to address shared challenges and build a resilient future.



**Marton Ugrosdy**, representing the Hungarian Presidency of the EU Council, emphasized the critical need to accelerate Albania and Southeastern Europe's EU integration. Highlighting their deep economic, cultural, and geographic ties to the EU, he urged the bloc to seize the current political momentum to deliver on its long-standing promises. Albania's remarkable progress in meeting EU standards should be acknowledged and rewarded to rebuild trust and sustain reform efforts across the region. Regional initiatives like the Open Balkans and the Common Regional Market are valuable stepping stones, but they must complement—not replace—the goal of full EU membership. Mr. Ugrosdy underscored the geopolitical importance of enlargement, particularly in the wake of global conflicts like the war in Ukraine, which have redefined Europe's priorities. He called for a merit-based and predictable accession process that ensures fairness and credibility while motivating lagging countries to advance reforms. Hungary's steadfast support for EU enlargement remains central, as demonstrated by its active role in assisting Albania and the region.

through events like the European Political Community Summit and the EU Western Balkans Summit.

**Valentina Superti** representing DG NEAR emphasized the need to de-dramatize the process of EU enlargement, noting that it should be recognized not just as a necessary step but as a success story, bringing wealth and growth to both new and existing EU member states. Ms. Superti highlighted that enlargement is a win-win situation and reflected on the importance of using objective data to understand its benefits. She stressed the merit-based nature of EU accession, rooted in reforms like rule of law and fundamental rights, which are crucial for the preparedness of new member states. While discussing the role of civil society in the enlargement process, she noted that their involvement can facilitate confidence building and address societal challenges. The focus then shifted to connectivity, particularly in the Western Balkans, where sustainable connectivity is crucial for economic growth, regional cooperation, and eventual integration into the EU. She highlighted the European Commission's support through initiatives like the Economic and Investment Plan and the Growth Plan, which aim to increase financial assistance and investments in the region. This effort is part of a broader strategy of progressive integration, which prepares the Western Balkan countries for eventual accession, ensuring a smoother transition and long-term economic convergence with the EU.



The Special Envoy of Germany for the Western Balkans, **Manuel Sarrazin**, reflected on the Berlin Process's strides in fostering regional cooperation and aligning the Western Balkans with EU integration, evident in achievements like the Transport Community. However, challenges remain, particularly the deadlock in CEFTA due to Kosovo's representation issue under UNMIK and unresolved trade bans between Kosovo and Serbia,

which undermine the principles of free trade and regional collaboration. While inclusivity remains the goal, he stated that Germany is prepared to propose a "6 minus 1" model, ensuring progress continues without letting one party stall the entire region. Tangible benefits, such as mutual recognition of work permits, streamlined border processes, and cheaper parcel delivery, are critical to demonstrating the real-life impact of regional cooperation. Germany, alongside its European partners, stresses the importance of maintaining EU *acquis* alignment as the guiding framework for cooperation. The Summit must deliver meaningful results to sustain public trust in the region's capacity to integrate and grow together into the EU. If consensus among all six participants proves unattainable, Germany will push forward pragmatic solutions to ensure regional progress while leaving the door open for re-engagement by any reluctant parties.



With organized civil society having a key take in the EU enlargement process, **Oliver Röpke**, President of the European Economic and Social Committee, highlighted the EESC's role as a link between citizens and policymakers. He underscored the need for success stories from candidate countries like Albania to demonstrate progress and meet EU requirements. The launch of the Enlargement Candidate Members initiative was highlighted as a vital step in involving civil society representatives from candidate countries in the EU legislative process. This initiative helps ensure that the process is gradual, predictable, and merit-based, paving the way for successful integration of candidate countries into the EU. The process of enlargement must include strong solidarity measures alongside conditionality to ensure that candidate countries are fully prepared for EU membership, with a focus on rule of law, civic space, and public administration reforms. The role of social partners and civil society organizations is critical in monitoring these reforms and ensuring that the accession process is transparent and participatory, thus making the EU enlargement process more sustainable and effective.



### Increasing private sector footprint in the EU-supported connectivity initiatives

Building upon the [conclusions of Berlin Process Spring Event 2024](#), the discussion focused on private sector involvement in both financing and implementation of EU connectivity initiatives.

#### *Panelists:*

- Mr. Vincenzo Del Monaco, Minister Plenipotentiary, co-chair of the G7 Digital & Tech Working Group, Ministry of Entrepreneurship and of Made in Italy (online)
- Mr. Matteo Rivellini, Head of Division, European Investment Bank (online)
- Ms. Diana Leka, Head of Secretariat, Albania Investment Council
- Ms. Anja Quiring, Regional Director for South East Europe, German Eastern Business Association

*Moderated* by Mr. Ardian Hackaj, Tirana Connectivity Forum Coordinator, CDI

*Discussants:* Mr. Piervittorio Farabbi, Chief Operating Officer, Tirana International Airport; Mr. Alexander Rahr, Senior Fellow, WeltTrends Institute for International Politics, Potsdam, Germany.

As co-chair of the G7 Digital and Tech Working Group, **Mr. Vincenzo Del Monaco** brought in the Italian expertise the transferability of projects and models across different world regions focusing on the main components of ongoing efforts in directing public support and fostering private investment in digital connectivity in 3rd countries.



As the underlying principles and processes often remain effective, the components of a successful transferability include an; i) exhaustive approach to identifying challenges and fostering collaborative solutions and potential beneficiaries, and an; ii) openness to feedback and adaptation, emphasizing the importance of learning from experience. While initial discussions and rehearsals can help shape initiatives, real success can only be

determined after implementation. It's essential to remain flexible, applying lessons learned to refine and improve over time.

**Matteo Rivellini** underlined the role of EIB as the EU's policy implementation arm and a major investor in the region. Taking into account the regions investment needs, EIB Global "cajoles" private investors into development projects. It not only provides financial support but also fosters governance reforms, technical expertise, and private sector involvement to create a sustainable ecosystem for growth in the Western Balkans that helps ensure that, upon EU membership, these nations are ready to transition smoothly without lengthy adaptation periods.

The Western Balkans commitment to the EU accession path, resisting alternative geopolitical influences while advancing crucial structural reforms by 2027, is essential not only for EU integration but also for creating opportunities that encourage citizens to thrive and stay in their home countries.

After outlining the challenges Albanian businesses face in accessing the EU's Single Market, Ms. **Diana Leka** emphasized the Albanian Investment Council's support for earlier access, advocating for a human-centric approach that promotes greater cohesion to prevent imbalances and market fragmentation.

Investment in digitalization should respects principles of cybersecurity and facilitate professionals working from Albania or other countries of the region. This kind of investment also contributes to stem the immigration wave impacting region's workforce.

German investment in the region depends on the existence of a supporting business climate that benefits both European and local companies, stressed **Anja Quiring**. Central to this is ensuring the rule of law, as it provides legal protections for investments and business activities, fostering trust and stability. Equally important is maintaining an open and effective dialogue between governments and businesses to address



changes in legislation, develop reform plans, and align with broader strategic goals like those outlined in the Growth Plan.

In this context, civil society must also play a key role in this process - its inclusion ensures that economic development efforts are sustainable and address broader societal needs. This is particularly critical for advancing decarbonization efforts and implementing the European Green Deal, including potential adaptations like the Industrial Green Deal at the European level.

Finally, the region must prioritize the development of a skilled and qualified workforce, as the availability of trained labor is directly linked to the success of businesses and overall economic development.

## Western Balkans as a Security Provider for EU – the role of Connectivity Infrastructure

Reflecting on the ongoing war in Europe’s eastern flank, the discussions focus on the contribution of WB6 connectivity infrastructure to Europe’s security and resilience.

### Panelists:

- Mr. Pirro Vengu, Minister of Defense, Albania
- Mr. Filip Radulović, Minister of Maritime Affairs, Montenegro
- Mr. Marko Makovec, Director and Deputy Managing Director, European External Action Service (online)
- Mr. Matej Zakonjsek, Director, Permanent Secretariat of the Transport Community
- Mr. Zsolt Bunford, Hungarian Special Envoy for the Western Balkans
- Mr. René Troccaz, Special Envoy for the Western Balkans of France (online)

*Moderated* by Mr. Knut Fleckenstein, Former Member of European Parliament

*Discussants:* Mr. Alexander Beribes, Office for the Western Balkans and Southeast Europe, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung; Ms. Dragana Djurica, Secretary General, European Movement Serbia.

Albanian Minister of Defense **Pirro Vengu** started by mentioning the growing pressure felt across Europe to redefine and strengthen military-industrial capabilities in response to challenges like the war in Ukraine. Albania’s approach to this is innovative and resource-conscious, aiming to maximize impact by embracing a “dual-use” strategy—where civilian and military purposes intersect: The Porto Romano port project sets an example. With a total budget envelope of €390 million, €54 million is specifically allocated for military



infrastructure, ensuring the investment serves both civilian and military needs from the outset.

Another development is Albania's efforts to revitalize its military industry. This involves strengthening specialized state enterprises, streamlining regulations, and encouraging innovation in dual-use manufacturing—industries that serve both civilian and defense purposes. A prime reference for this approach is the Draghi report, which has highlighted how dual-use industrial policy can be a powerful instrument of statecraft. For Albania and the Western Balkans, this strategy offers a pathway to economic growth while bolstering regional security.

Minister **Filip Radulović** mentioned the strategic role that Montenegro's plays in regional maritime security in the Adriatic. Significant investments have been made in maritime surveillance, including traffic monitoring systems and digital notifications for vessels entering national waters. These advancements are crucial, especially after a challenging year marked by multiple maritime accidents.

Montenegro actively contributes to energy security in the region and in the Adriatic basin, a critical concern amid the ongoing war in Ukraine. Its commitment strengthens both regional stability and economic resilience, with promising developments on the horizon.

The EU is deepening ties with the Western Balkans through the Growth Plan stated **Marko Makovec** representing EEAS, focusing on regional cooperation and infrastructure development and connecting the region to the EU via transport, energy, and digital projects, the plan aims to foster socioeconomic convergence and resilience in a challenging geopolitical context.

Increasing region's ability to align with EU foreign and defense policies and ensuring faster deployment of personnel and resources, EU is integrating regional partners into initiatives like PESCO and the European Peace Facility, as well as enhancing military mobility and cooperation.

On energy and cyber resilience, the EU is driving diversification projects like the Southern Gas Corridor and funding cybersecurity initiatives in the Western Balkans. In response to the Ukraine war, the region has also been included in joint EU programs for energy procurement and food security, reinforcing integration and shared stability.



Director of Transport Community **Mr. Matej Zakonjšek** brought in the need to accelerate reforms, improve standards, and advance infrastructure projects to unlock the region's immense potential. Corridor 8 and Corridor 10 are not new concepts—they've been envisioned for over a century. However, in recent decades, rail infrastructure has been neglected. That's finally changing, with construction now underway in Albania, North Macedonia, and

Bulgaria.

A modern rail system is essential—not only for civilian use but also to address geopolitical realities and dual-use needs. By aligning military and civilian priorities, we can ensure infrastructure benefits all sectors, driving progress and connectivity across the region. To make this vision a reality, three critical steps are required: modernizing ports, upgrading rail networks, and improving border crossings.

**Zsolt Bunford** conveyed a key message from the Hungarian Presidency of the EU Council: to build a truly unified Europe, accelerating the integration process is essential. Leaving a geopolitical "black hole" in the heart of Europe—surrounded by EU member states—is not an option, especially from a security perspective.

The war in Ukraine has been a stark reminder that security cannot be taken for granted. The war has also highlighted the critical importance of energy security. Diversifying both financial resources and energy sources is vital, and the Western Balkans region plays a key role in this effort. Europe's energy security is deeply connected to the region's energy potential. To realize this potential, we need robust infrastructure. Interconnectors and other energy projects are critical to diversify supply and ensure stability. Supporting such initiatives is crucial for the region's role as a reliable energy partner for Europe.

French Special Envoy for the Western Balkans **René Troccaz** stated that: "Europe must avoid the Western Balkans becoming a "gray zone" by focusing on strengthening the rule of law, stabilizing societies, and addressing foreign influence", he said. The region's integration into the EU is essential, but unresolved conflicts cannot be imported into the Union, as stability and credibility are paramount.

Already Western Balkan countries receive significant financial support, nearly matching that of EU states per capita. France alone has invested over €1 billion in the past five years in the region, in infrastructure, energy, etc. However, a regional approach is needed to tackle shared challenges like pollution, which knows no borders, and improve outdated transport links that hinder connectivity. Progress in these areas is key to aligning the Western Balkans with the EU's vision.



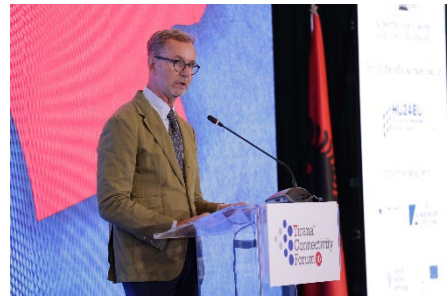
**Dragana Djurica** from European Movement Serbia put the focus on connectivity externalities and on its people dimension. Infrastructure projects should prioritize the needs of people over the interests of companies or foreign investors, with civil society playing a key role in ensuring that public concerns are addressed. Retaining talent is also essential, requiring strong economic policies and retention strategies to prevent the outflow of experts and workers critical to regional progress.

Ms. Djurica concluded by emphasizing the importance of cohesion and convergence alongside market alignment. The region's future hinges on three key pillars: commitment, cohesion, and communication. Commitment to EU integration and foundational values is crucial for reforms and transparency. Cohesion ensures no region or community is left behind, integrating even remote areas into broader development efforts. Communication must actively involve citizens, making them partners in shaping initiatives that impact their lives.

## Day 2 | Wednesday, 11 September 2024

The second day of TCF24 opened with contributions emphasizing regional cooperation, economic and social alignment, EU accession reforms, the role of investment and economic plans, and strengthening public sector capacity for sustainable integration in the Western Balkans.

The EU Ambassador to Albania, **Silvio Gonzato**, marked the 10th anniversary of the Berlin Process as a significant reminder of the importance of regional cooperation and connectivity among Southeast European countries and their relationship with the EU. This process has laid the groundwork for deeper collaboration in areas such as infrastructure development, energy security, and digitalization.



Ambassador Gonzato emphasized that the EU's Economic and Investment Plan is crucial in promoting economic and social convergence in the Western Balkans, supporting infrastructure projects that enhance connectivity, foster economic growth, and improve energy security and efficiency in the region. He highlighted that the path toward EU accession requires comprehensive reforms, particularly in legislative frameworks and regulatory alignment. The Reform and Growth Facility aims to make these reforms actionable by linking investment with necessary changes, ensuring the region's readiness for EU membership. By investing in connectivity and reforms, the region can build a more sustainable and stable future.



In his video-message for TCF24, Former Italian Prime Minister **Enrico Letta** emphasized key points from his report "Much more than a market," highlighting the importance of ensuring freedom to stay within the EU as crucial as freedom to move. He stressed that everyone, regardless of location, should have access to services of general interest, allowing citizens in all regions to feel part of the EU's benefits. Letta also addressed the issue

of brain drain, which is not just a collateral effect of economic mobility but a serious challenge requiring new approaches. The new cohesion funds and the proposed Solidarity Enlargement Facility are vital for facilitating enlargement and investing in the region. These mechanisms are essential for creating a more inclusive and connected Europe that prioritizes the well-being of its citizens.

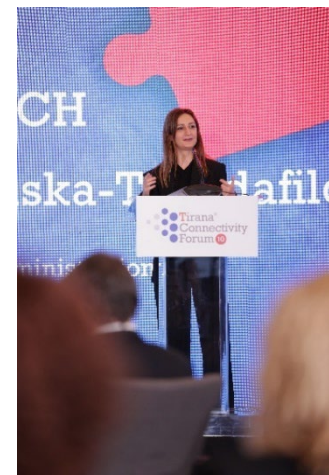
**Tanja Mišćević**, Serbian Minister of European Integration, highlighted the Growth Plan's role in enabling participation in EU policies even before full membership. This includes joining the Single European Payment Area and developing green lanes for smoother cross-border trade. Reform agendas are crucial in this process, setting specific targets for alignment with EU norms and practices. Addressing issues like remittance transfer rates and reducing border crossing delays, the Growth Plan contributes to the broader goals of the Single Market. Mišćević emphasized that accelerating the integration process is essential to bring tangible benefits to citizens and businesses in the Western Balkans and the involvement of member states is vital to ensure the Growth Plan is effectively owned and implemented by both the Western Balkans and the EU.



For **Elda Kalaja** from the Regional Cooperation Council, investing in human capital and improving the business environment is essential for building a resilient and competitive region. She stated that the new phase of the CRM has been shaped through extensive consultations with civil society and stakeholders, allowing for a broad reflection on EU standards and the integration of local needs. This inclusive approach

marks a significant development in regional cooperation.

To successfully implement reforms, it's essential to strengthen human capital in the public sector stressed **Maja Handjiska-Trendafilova** of the Regional School of Public Administration. The capacity of public administration will determine whether these reforms succeed or become a barrier to progress. A strong and effective public sector is needed to absorb and implement policies and reforms, especially considering past challenges like slow integration and limited career progression within public administration. The Berlin Process and the EU must provide more systematic and continuous support for institutional and administrative capacity building. This includes utilizing existing regionally owned structures and expanding opportunities for learning and capacity building in the public sector.



## Reviewing EU accession policy toolbox

EU and SEE6 policy-makers and systemic actors present latest developments impacting accession pace and its intended benefits for the Europe's citizen.

### Panelists:

- Ms. Jorida Tabaku, Chair of EU Integration Commission, Member of Albanian Parliament
- Mr. Thilo Schroeter, Chargé d'Affaires, German Embassy, Albania
- Mr. Jorge Núñez Ferrer, Director for Cohesion & EU Budget, Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions
- Mr. Thomas Schwab, Senior Expert, European Economics, Bertelsmann Stiftung
- Ms. Jana Juzová, Research Fellow, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy

*Moderated* by Ms. Milena Mihajlović, Programme Director, European Policy Centre, Belgrade

*Discussants:* Ms. Luisa Chiodi, Director, Osservatorio Balcani and Caucaso Transeuropa; Ms. Krisela Hackaj, Director, Cooperation and Development Institute



Member of the Parliament **Jorida Tabaku** advocated for a bigger role for national parliaments in the Berlin Process. She praised civil society's active engagement with the Parliament, advocating for its role in monitoring and implementing commitments from processes like the Berlin Process. Collaboration between the legislative branch and the CSOs enables monitoring of government engagements and their

implementation. However, challenges persist in tracking these commitments and ensuring a process that includes all stakeholders, not just the government. Achieving this requires a collective effort, with parliament serving as a hub for open and inclusive dialogue.

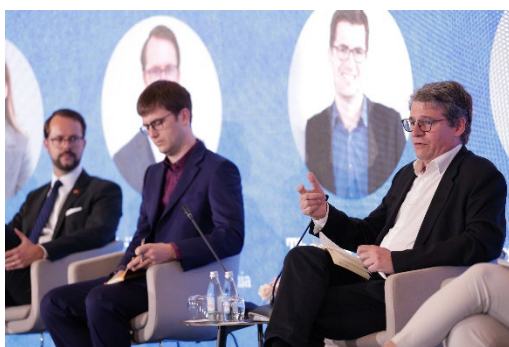
The parliamentary structure of Albania's National Council on European Integration was created to ensure bipartisan collaboration, bringing civil society into the process. Yet, recent government decisions to shift parts of its role to a special committee have undermined this unity. As elections approach, it's vital to avoid partisanship and treat the integration process as a shared national priority. Parliament must remain the forum for continuous dialogue and progress, ensuring that European integration is a long-term effort benefiting all Albanians, not a tool for short-term political gains.





**Thilo Schroeter** outlined the Slovenian - German proposal to streamline the EU enlargement process based primarily on the adoption qualified majority voting for interim steps, such as opening negotiation chapters. This approach would prevent the concerns of a single member state from blocking candidates who are actively reforming and aligning with EU standards.

The proposal maintains unanimity for key milestones like closing negotiation clusters, full accession, and ratification by national parliaments. It ensures that the process remains rigorous while allowing candidates to demonstrate progress without unnecessary delays. The ultimate goal is to create a fairer, faster system that motivates reforms and ensures no one is held back from doing the hard work required for EU membership.



**Jorge Núñez Ferrer** emphasized the importance of the good governance dividend in EU membership. Joining the EU is about more than accessing funds—it requires active, visionary participation in the single market. Countries approaching enlargement must prioritize a clear plan and a long-term vision, rather than viewing accession merely as a funding opportunity. Without this preparation, as seen in some past

cases, accession risks becoming directionless and poorly equipped to handle the demands of integration.

The ultimate aim is meaningful participation in the single market, ensuring success both as a policymaker and a beneficiary, while developing solutions that engage all stakeholders. Effective preparation involves creating a comprehensive strategy, training personnel to manage future funding, and establishing systems that make fund access straightforward for citizens. The emphasis should be on empowering beneficiaries—individuals and communities alike—rather than relying solely on government-led programs.

In this context, the SEE6 should actively contribute to shaping the next Multiannual Financial Framework and advocate for pre-accession mechanisms that resemble cohesion policies even before accession. This will ensure a smoother integration and aligns processes early on, making future implementation more effective.

**Thomas Schwab** mentioned the Single Market opportunities, as well as its propensity to inequality—there are winners and losers. While some benefit greatly, others may face challenges like job losses, creating a gap that highlights the need for a fair distribution of benefits. Cohesion policy was designed to address this, ensuring solidarity by supporting those who may lose out while enhancing efficiency and competitiveness in the Single Market. Cohesion policy is not perfect, but it's essential. It goes beyond funding; it's about building networks, fostering connections, and driving innovation to maximize gains within the economic network of the single market. More Single Market integration means more cohesion policy—these two are inseparable.



**Jana Juzova** analyzed different enlargement scenarios from economic, security, and democratic perspectives. The findings suggest that the traditional approach to enlargement is the costliest, as it has led to democratic decline, limited economic gains, and increased security threats in the region. A fast-track enlargement, while potentially beneficial, comes with risks, especially regarding rule of law and governance. The most promising approach seems to be gradual integration, which could offer smaller costs and larger benefits, provided it's well-implemented.

However, challenges remain: tying gradual integration to the formal accession process is problematic due to political obstacles within the EU, and the rise of nationalism makes it harder to achieve consensus. Furthermore, there's concern that gradual integration might not reignite the democratic momentum seen in past enlargements.

In that optic, EU accession should be about more than financial benefits; it must also focus on societal, institutional, and democratic transformation to avoid disillusionment.

The integration process will create winners and losers, and to navigate this, we need robust public debates, which CSOs and think tanks alone cannot drive stated **Luisa Chiodi**. One missing element in this discussion is the media freedom, which is essential for reinforcing societal partnerships. We shouldn't overlook the weakness of trade unions in the region and the political elites' focus on visibility over substantive debates as this disconnect contributes to the lack of tangible results from the numerous regional initiatives, ended Ms. Chiodi.



**Krisela Hackaj** highlighted two major novelties of the Reform and Growth Facility: its inclusivity and accountability. The facility introduces monitoring committees that include social partners, fostering a more inclusive approach. Additionally, the facility introduces a scoreboard, offering tools for better data availability and transparency—tools actually missing from IPA. This is crucial for civil society, think tanks, and academia, enabling them to monitor,

engage, and improve policymaking.

For civil society organizations, this facility marks an initial step toward reforming the enlargement process, with 2026 set to be a critical year for deepening engagement.

## Single Market and SEE6 Regional cooperation

High Level experts and CSO representatives discuss about Common Regional Market progress, Growth Plan push to faster access to EU Single Market, and role of social actors.

### Panelists:

- Ms. Biljana Stanišić Dragoljić, Senior Monitoring and Reporting Expert, Regional Cooperation Council
- Ms. Olivera Ceni Bardiqi, Trade Facilitation Expert, Central Europe Free Trade Agreement
- Ms. Ledia Bregu, Director, Department of Payment Systems, Accounting and Finance, Bank of Albania
- Ms. Blerina Raca, Project Manager, Support to accession negotiations in economic chapters of acquis project, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH

*Moderated by* Ms. Fjoralba Caka, Senior Expert, Cooperation and Development Institute

*Discussants:* Mr. Ionut Sibian, Member, European Economic and Social Committee; Ms. Francesca Porcelli, Policy Officer for Social and Economic Development, Growth Plan Coordinator; Mr. Stefan Ristovski, Researcher, European Policy Institute; Mr. Sokol Zeneli, Independent Consultant on EU Integration, Regional Cooperation, International Trade and Development



**Biljana Stanišić Dragoljić** outlined RCC's focus on leveraging the outcomes of the Common Regional Market Action Plan 1.0, prioritizing human capital development, and reducing barriers to labor mobility within the region and the EU. Over the next four years RCC aim is to close skill gaps, enhance labor market reforms, and expand economic opportunities. This includes fostering regional innovation,

advancing a business-enabling environment, and supporting competitiveness through green and sustainable finance initiatives for SME and digital transformation. Amid global challenges, regional cooperation is not optional but essential for positioning the Western Balkans as a competitive economic player.

**Olivera Ceni Bardiqi** from CEFTA stated that recommendations from CSOs have already been integrated into CEFTA's goals and CRM frameworks, emphasizing support for small businesses and local producers across the Western Balkans. These contributions underscore the value of CSOs in bridging the gap between strategic regional goals and the needs of the general public and raising awareness about the challenges of implementing these measures, helping citizens understand both the opportunities offered by CRM 2.0 and the complexities involved in achieving them.

To deepen collaboration with CSOs, a participatory platform for ongoing dialogue between CEFTA, policymakers, businesses, and CSOs, can be established. This would

ensure continuous engagement, fostering mutual understanding and facilitating the incorporation of actionable CSO insights into policy.

**Blerina Raca** delved into the intricacies of alignment of regional processes, timelines, instruments, and institutions under the shared goal of approximating national legislation with the EU acquis and European standards. While the signature and ratification of CRM Mobility Agreements by all regional countries mark a vital first step, much work remains to ensure their effective implementation and offer tangible benefits for citizens.

As for the two agreements on recognition of professional qualifications, Albania has made notable progress in aligning its minimum training conditions for seven sectoral professions covered by these agreements, with full curriculum alignment by higher education institutions expected by 2027–28. Beyond legislative alignment, additional steps are necessary to facilitate professional mobility, such as updating the list of regulated professions and addressing administrative barriers. Albania, with SANECA support, has identified approximately 300 regulated professions and is working to refine and expand this list.



At the EU level, the EESC operates through Domestic Advisory Groups within the framework of free trade agreements, advising the European Commission (DG Trade) on sustainable development chapters. This approach underscores the importance of civil society's role in shaping agreements stated **Ionut Sibian**. EESC's work on the Growth Plan and Western Balkans reforms stresses timely and meaningful consultation with

civil society. The EESC is committed to advocating for greater civic space and deeper civil society involvement in the EU enlargement process, emphasizing their role in driving reforms and bridging government-citizen gaps. In this context, civil society's contributions, particularly from youth, are vital. Addressing brain drain and incorporating the "Youth Test" in policy-making is a key recommendation for Western Balkans governments to ensure reforms prioritize youth-centric outcomes.

**Stefan Ristovski** illustrated some main engagements of civil society in WBs to address delays in implementing regional agreements under the Berlin Process. Accelerating this timeline is essential for advancing regional cooperation. The CRM Action Plan, which includes over 50 measures, illustrates this challenge—many measures remain unimplemented, underlining the need for parallel progress across all sectors. This calls for enhanced administrative capacities within national institutions to ensure political commitments translate into actionable results over the agreed four-year periods. EU Integration must go beyond selective, "à la carte" access, focusing instead on freer and closer alignment with the Single Market framework. EU's decision to use qualified majority voting in certain areas of integration reflects a shift that requires further consideration and regional alignment. These developments underscore the need for a unified regional strategy that maximizes opportunities while addressing structural challenges.

## Key takeaways

Tirana Connectivity Forum 2024 (TCF24), held on September 10-11, 2024, celebrated its 10th anniversary, reflecting on the Southeast Europe Six countries' journey towards EU integration. The forum focused on three main themes: connectivity and resilience, regional cooperation, and innovative scenarios in speeding up SEE6 accession to EU. It gathered a diverse group of stakeholders, including EU and Western Balkans politicians, policymakers, financiers, and civil society actors, to reflect on a decade of progress under the Berlin Process and to chart the course for future cooperation and development in the region in its path to the EU.

A central focus of TCF24 was the *"accession before membership"* proposal, aimed at delivering immediate EU benefits to the SEE6 citizens before the countries' membership into the EU. This approach would normalize enlargement, reflect the de facto integration of SEE6 into the EU economic system, align the region with EU policies, and offer tangible benefits. The ongoing Growth Plan for SEE6 and discussions on the new EU Cohesion Policy present an opportunity to enhance the EU-SEE6 relationship.

Held under the auspices of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Albania, and part of the official calendar of the Hungarian Presidency of the EU Council, TCF24 was organized with the support of German Federal Foreign Office, Hanns Seidel Foundation, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs via SMART Balkans, Regional Cooperation Council, Regional School of Public Administration and GIZ Albania.





10th edition of  
Tirana Connectivity Forum

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