

12th edition



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Tirana Connectivity Forum 2026 Report

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Tirana Connectivity Forum 2026 Report

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About the Tirana Connectivity Forum (TCF)

Tirana Connectivity Forum is the only such event covering connectivity, reforms and enlargement in the Southeast 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 Report.

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. 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 - EU.

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TCF 2026 CONCEPT

Tirana Connectivity Forum 2026 (TCF 2026) convened at a defining moment for EU enlargement. With accession negotiations advancing for Montenegro and Albania; new EU financial instruments addressing convergence needs deployed in the Western Balkans; and preparations for the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework 2028 – 2034 already underway, the region is shifting from a preparatory phase to one of delivery. This new phase calls for sustained political commitment, institutional readiness, measurable results, and genuine public ownership of national reform agendas.

Yet the conditions for success remain uneven. Candidate countries administrative capacities are stretched, and support for stakeholder engagement has been waning, all while the time window for meaningful implementation is narrowing. Left unaddressed, these gaps risk undermining reform credibility at precisely the moment when the enlargement process demands more of its partners.

TCF 2026 endeavored to respond directly to these challenges. The Forum served as a high-level platform for examining what it takes to translate enlargement commitments into concrete outcomes; for accelerating reform implementation without compromising accountability; and for valorizing the place-based skills needed to navigate an increasingly complex governance landscape.

The Forum opened with keynote addresses and a high-level panel setting the strategic framework, before turning in the afternoon to the imperatives at the heart of TCF 2026: the preparedness of public administrations and of business actors to meet Enlargement requirements; to deliver on the demands of EU Membership; and to be ready for the next EU policy and budget cycle.

The second day shifted focus to connectivity. Featuring South Adriatic Area rail sector developments in Albania, Montenegro and South Italy, the Forum explored how the inclusion of the region in the EU TEN-T and the work done under respective Connectivity EU Acquis Chapters, is contributing into the negotiation progress, unlocking regional economic potential, and creating new business opportunities.



DAY I

“Accession before Membership”: Gradual Integration as a path to full EU membership

The 12th edition of Tirana Connectivity Forum opened with remarks by H.E. Sofia Moreira de Sousa, EU Ambassador to Albania, followed by a high-level discussion with Ferit Hoxha, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania; Christophe Galand, Deputy Director for the Western Balkans at DG ENEST; and Karl Bergner, Ambassador of Germany to Albania.



The discussion coincided with the European Commission's at the same day of its new pre-enlargement policy package and presentation of Communication *Preparing for a Wider Union*, accompanied by a Staff Working Document. The package proposes measures to prepare the EU for future enlargement including the implications for its policies, institutions and functioning; supporting the gradual, merit-based integration of candidate countries before full membership; and introducing stronger safeguards in upcoming accession treaties. It also foresees indicative roadmaps for the most advanced negotiating countries, including Albania.



From adoption to delivery

In her opening remarks, Ambassador Moreira de Sousa stressed that Albania and the Western Balkans have entered a new phase of the EU integration process – a phase of delivery. *“The EU will continue its strong political, technical and financial support to all six Western Balkan partners to help them advance key political, institutional, social and economic reforms that are necessary to progress on their path towards the EU,”* said Ambassador Moreira de Sousa.



“Reform-based delivery is key for preparing the country for the new EU instruments and policies”, the Ambassador continued, ending by underlining that connectivity is about more than roads, bridges and energy networks. It also encompasses digital links, regional security, resilience, trade, mobility and sustainable partnerships.

Albania's 2027 objective

Minister Ferit Hoxha underlined Albania's accession next phase should be guided by a clear roadmap and a shared commitment between Albania, the European Commission and EU Member States. He reaffirmed country's objective of concluding its accession negotiations by 2027, while stressing that the process will deliver reforms that are implemented, and verifiable results.



"We are moving forward chapter by chapter, criterion by criterion, reform by reform, with the objective of concluding the accession negotiations by end of 2027. Reforms are not conditions imposed from outside; they are investments in a stronger, more democratic and more prosperous Albania," said Minister Hoxha.

Minister Hoxha also supported gradual integration as a means for candidate countries to access EU before formal accession. In the gradual integration framework, *"access before accession"* provides to the acceding countries a structured path towards full membership. This approach offers stronger incentives for reform, builds administrative capacity and makes the benefits of European integration more visible to citizens and businesses.



Christophe Galand stressed that the accession process remains merit-based. He highlighted the need for simpler EU financing instruments and a better balance between conditionality and predictability, particularly for major infrastructure projects requiring long-term planning. Performance-based support, including the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, will continue to link EU funding to concrete reforms and investments.



Ambassador Karl Bergner further detailed the concept of gradual integration as based on three principles: conditionality, reversibility and directionality. *"Gradual integration should be a structured offer for all candidates. It is not a substitute for eventual full membership, but a way towards it"*, said Ambassador Bergner.



He added that the EU must also prepare for enlargement by improving decision-making, strengthening institutional capacity and ensuring that the Union can function effectively with more members.

Connectivity as a test of readiness

The panel described transport, energy and digital connectivity as practical tests of Candidate Country enlargement readiness. Better transport links should improve cross-border mobility and trade. Digital connectivity should provide faster and more interoperable public services. Energy connectivity should support renewable energy, market integration and resilience.

The speakers also reaffirmed the importance of regional cooperation and of the Berlin Process as complements to the EU accession process. The recognition of qualifications, customs facilitation, regional roaming and participation in EU programmes show how cross-border cooperation embedded in the EU enlargement track, can improve people's daily lives before formal membership.

The discussion concluded that enlargement is a shared responsibility. Albania and the other Western Balkan partners must deliver reforms and strengthen their institutions. The EU and its Member States must, in parallel, prepare their own policies, institutions and decision-making processes for a larger Union.

The shared objective is to replace the waiting-room approach with a process of measurable progress: reforms delivered, benefits felt and access granted whenever possible before accession while full EU membership remains the final goal.

Institutional Preparedness for EU Performance-based Instruments

The Reform and Growth Facility (RGF) is changing how the EU financially supports the reforms in the Western Balkans and how governments must design and deliver them. Being ready for performance-based financing demands effective coordination, realistic priorities, reliable evidence and transparency and accountability for measurable results.



This was at the centre of discussions at the panel discussion *"Readiness under Scrutiny: The Reform and Growth Facility (RGF) and Institutional Preparedness for EU Performance-Based Instruments"* moderated by CDI Executive Director Krisela Hackaj. The discussion brought together Mr. Filip Chaparoski of the Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA); Ms. Eridana Çano, Director

General of the State Agency for Strategic Programming and Aid Coordination (SASPAC) and Albania's RGF National Coordinator; Mr. Bojan Vujović, National Reform Agenda Coordinator at Montenegro's Ministry of European Affairs; and Ms. Laima Andrikenė, Member of the European Court of Auditors.



Opening the discussion, Chaparoski described readiness as *"a system, not a checklist"* highlighting five essential dimensions defining it: strategic priorities, institutional coordination, implementation capacity, evidence and verification, and accountability. Performance-based financing, he argued, should become *"an accelerator of reform rather than another layer of compliance."*

Albania: building a culture of delivery



The RGF shifts the focus from financing activities to demonstrating verified results.

Çano explained that Albania has introduced a clear results chain linking commitments, outcomes, responsible institutions, evidence and deadlines, and supported by weekly monitoring to identify delays and implementation risks. *"Result-based financing changes not only how reforms*

are financed, but also how government needs to manage them," she said.

Under its third reporting package, Albania reported 38 reform steps as completed, linked to around €215 million in financing. Disbursements from the first two reporting packages and pre-financing has reached €212.8 million.

For Çano, the key achievement is a stronger delivery culture grounded in political ownership, coordination, transparency and accountability. For the next RGF phase, she called for implementation readiness to be built into reform design from the outset, including clear responsibilities, verification methods, data sources and evidence requirements.

Montenegro: closely linking reform delivery to accession targets



For Montenegro, the RGF has reinforced the country's EU accession process, particularly the efforts to close negotiating chapters. Mr. Vujović said many RGF reform steps overlap with accession benchmarks, creating an additional incentive for institutions to deliver.

Vujović highlighted the country's initial €383 million allocation and the €90 million received, alongside the financing of five identified Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) projects in energy, education infrastructure and digitalisation.

He stressed that ministries must own the reforms, while coordinators can support implementation and communication with the European Commission. He also noted that institutions are still adapting to the facility's financing model, under which activities are

financed from national budgets before EU payments are made as a reward for verified performance.

Infrastructure delivery project maturity and impact remain challenges



Joining online, European Court of Auditors member Ms. Andrikiene noted that the Court has not yet audited the RGF itself. However, its June 2026 report on the WBIF is directly relevant, as at least half of RGF resources is expected to flow through WBIF facility.



Drawing on the Court's audit, she said many projects had been approved before reaching sufficient maturity. Projects typically began around 17 months later than planned, with further delays often exceeding two years. The audit found examples of completed connectivity infrastructure that could not yet deliver benefits because connecting sections remained unfinished. Based on implementation delays, weak project preparation and operational difficulties, the Court concluded that the region's goal of completing the core Trans-European

Transport Network by 2030 is unlikely to be met.

Ms. Andrikiene also stressed that indicators must measure real impact, not only formal milestones. Governments should demonstrate whether laws are implemented, whether new infrastructure improves connectivity and if the reforms produce lasting institutional change. She called for clearer guidance on how *"satisfactory fulfilment"* of payment conditions is assessed, particularly where fulfilment is partial.

"The Western Balkans need reforms that work and infrastructure that connects people, markets and opportunities - not more paperwork or infrastructure that exists only on paper," she added.

Preparing for the next EU financing cycle

Looking towards the proposed Global Europe instrument for the post-2027 EU budget, panelists called for a simpler, more predictable framework connecting reform, investment, technical assistance and measurable results.

Ms. Çano said the next instrument should be designed as an accession-delivery instrument, allowing candidate countries to follow one clear pathway from national priorities to EU accession priorities. Flexibility should be combined with clear results, credible assurances and multiannual predictability.

Mr. Vujović said Montenegro is preparing for the eventual transition towards cohesion policy funding by strengthening strategic planning, investment preparation and institutional capacity. *"Instruments will change at one point of time but strategic priorities should not change"* – he added. In Montenegro, the benchmarks for closing Chapter 22 were used to define the outline of future National and Regional Partnership Plan, which the new draft Cohesion Policy regulation requires of all Member States. Vujović added - *we also need to plan the reform layer, which the Commission intends to make an obligatory precondition for releasing structural funds, even in existing Member States.*



Investment planning is the second pillar. Montenegro has adopted a National Master Plan of Investments up to 2030, with a methodology for identifying the most mature and relevant projects. Project maturity remains a challenge, but there is real progress: we now have projects ready for implementation that are held back only by the constraints of the contribution agreement

with the Commission. Usually, it was the other way around, with funds available but no mature projects.

Capacity building is the third component. Strong strategic planning depends on skilled administrative staff who can manage the transitions between instruments. The RGF, though not yet finished, is already helping the administration learn to handle conditionalities and reporting, and to prepare for membership obligations.

Building on Montenegro lessons learnt, he advised other countries to begin inclusive planning processes early.

Oversight and Transparency as part of readiness

The discussion also underscored the role of civil society, local authorities, academia, social partners and businesses in monitoring reforms, improving priorities and strengthening public trust.



Concluding the panel, Ms. Hackaj emphasised that CDI will continue to monitor the implementation of the RGF in Albania through its regular reporting and the [Reform Tracker](#) dashboard. The third monitoring report will be published soon. The [platform](#) provides updated information on progress across policy areas, absorption

capacity and reforms requiring particular attention, helping to keep implementation transparent and accountable.

Faster borders, lower costs: businesses call for a Common Regional Market that delivers

Faster border crossings, simpler procedures and lower trade costs must become the everyday reality of doing business across the Western Balkans. This was the main call at the panel discussion *"Connecting Through Trade: Building the Common Regional Market for Goods and Services,"* co-organised by the CEFTA Secretariat and CDI.

Bringing together government representatives, the European Commission, regional organisations and the private sector, the discussion focused on how to turn regional commitments and EU-aligned rules into practical improvements for businesses and citizens.

Opening the session, CEFTA Secretariat Director, Pranvera Kastrati, emphasised that regional connectivity goes beyond physical infrastructure and depends equally on the rules, procedures and trust that enable the free movement of goods, services and people. While investment in roads, railways and energy remains essential, the Common Regional Market (CRM) must also address the practical barriers businesses and citizens face in their daily activities. She stressed that CEFTA's work should remain responsive to their needs, with regional cooperation translating into simpler procedures, more predictable trade and tangible benefits across the Western Balkans.



For businesses, integration is measured at the border

Ronald Seeliger, CEO of Hemofarm Group and lead for STADA Group operations in the Western Balkans, urged policymakers to judge regional integration by whether businesses feel its effects in their bottom line. Drawing on his extensive experience in the pharmaceutical sector, he said medicines may need to be registered six times or more across the region, adding to administrative burdens and sometimes contributing to shortages that affect patients. He called for clear indicators to track the cost of doing business, border waiting times, transparency and investment conditions. Without tangible



progress, he warned, companies may reconsider their regional presence, with consequences for jobs, investment and product availability.

Klejvis Pengili, CEO of Milšped Albania, echoed the need for predictable documentation, consistent procedures and clear requirements across markets. He called for “one single point of trust” for traders, including Harmonized System codes. Pengili also highlighted Albania’s recently established single point of contact for business enquiries, which he said was helping companies to save time and money. Investment in customs technology and bonded warehouses is increasing as well. He encouraged businesses to engage more actively in government consultation processes on new legislation, noting that only around 20% had attended a recent Ministry’s call on new customs rules.



Agron Llugaliu, Director General of Kosovo Customs, presented examples of cooperation with Albania, including customs clearance for Kosovo-bound trade at the Port of Durrës since October 2022 and joint border crossing arrangements involving Albania and North Macedonia. He also pointed to the “one entry, one control” approach for passenger traffic as an example of practical coordination. Llugaliu reported that Kosovo’s pre-arrival declaration system had reduced waiting times from 10 hours and 30 minutes to only three hours. He also referred to a World Bank study indicating that bringing average waiting times in the Western Balkans four hours closer to the OECD average could increase regional GDP by 1.5–3%. However, progress at one border can be undermined by delays on the other side when neighboring administrations apply different procedures or operating hours. *“The lesson, he stressed, is that governments must harmonise not only regulations but also their practical implementation.”*



Panelists identified several priorities for making cross-border trade more efficient: digitalisation, including electronic signatures and paperless procedures; stronger customs cooperation and common risk-management practices; mutual recognition of documents and industrial-product test results; and greater recognition of Authorised Economic Operator programmes. They also stressed that businesses must be consulted when rules are designed and implemented.



CRM as a stepping stone towards the EU Single Market

Regional cooperation was also discussed as a practical way to prepare the Western Balkans for the EU Single Market.

Albania's Deputy Minister of Economy and Innovation, Enkelejd Musabelliu, described regional integration and EU accession as complementary processes, arguing that EU-aligned legislation creates opportunities only when institutions and businesses are equipped to put it into practice. Musabelliu noted that Albania had largely aligned its company law with EU rules. He also presented the Ministry's initiative to develop an AI-based platform that would allow businesses to enter their NACE activity code and identify the EU requirements relevant to their operations.



Christophe Galand, Deputy Director for the Western Balkans at DG ENEST, stressed that the CRM remains important given the region's geography and interconnected economies, where a lack of harmonisation can create significant barriers to trade. While it is not a precondition for EU accession, regional cooperation can deliver practical benefits even as countries advance towards membership at different speeds. He highlighted the gap between technical progress on common standards, mutual recognition and the political decisions needed to implement them, noting that accepting another party's certificate can be perceived as a political act. With the CRM's potential still far from fully realised, Galand called for continued efforts and new approaches to overcome existing obstacles and move regional integration forward.



Danijela Gačević, Head of Programme Department at the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), highlighted the importance of monitoring implementation and measuring the impact of the CRM Action Plan 2025–2028. She stated that full implementation of the plan's measures could increase regional GDP by 10%. The RCC is working with regional partners on a monitoring tool to track progress, clarify responsibilities and make the results of integration more visible. Gačević described the CRM as a stepping stone towards the EU Single Market and stressed that implementation matters *"for the sake of credibility."*



The discussion highlighted a key message: for the Common Regional Market to deliver on its promise, governments and regional partners must make implementation measurable, clarify responsibilities and ensure that businesses have a meaningful role in shaping reforms. Ultimately, the success of regional integration will be judged not by commitments on paper, but by whether it makes cross-border trade simpler, faster and more predictable for businesses and citizens.

DAY II

Albania puts connectivity, rail and investment at the heart of its EU path

Albania's EU accession and its further embedment in EU connectivity agenda are increasingly intertwined. Transport, energy and digital links facilitate and support access to Single Market and FDI attraction; support alignment with EU norms and standards; directly contribute in relevant negotiation chapters; push convergence with the EU; fluidify regional cooperation; and prepare institutions for membership readiness.



This was the central message at the opening of the second day of TCF2026, where Deputy Minister of Infrastructure and Energy Enkelejda Mucaj and Deputy Minister of Economy and Innovation Olta Manjani outlined how infrastructure development and investment can advance Albania's European integration and create a growth-supporting environment across the Western Balkans.

Their remarks set the stage for a day of discussions on the South Adriatic connectivity agenda, with a particular focus on railway development in Albania and in Montenegro.

Rail and regional connectivity as EU accession priorities



Ms. Mucaj described connectivity as a defining element of Albania's EU accession process, encompassing road, rail, air and maritime transport, alongside energy interconnections and digital transformation. She underlined the need for these systems to be planned, built and operated as an integrated whole embedded in EU framework, rather than as separate sectors.

She reported that Albania had fulfilled close to 80% of its commitments in the policy areas covered by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy, including Chapter 14 on transport and Chapter 21 on trans-European networks. She also said that respective interoperability

standards were expected to be in place by the end of 2026, laying the groundwork for stronger cross-border rail cooperation with Montenegro, Kosovo and North Macedonia.

Railway development remains a government priority, with work under way on the Tirana–Durrës–Airport railway and the rehabilitation of the Vorë–Hani i Hotit line. Mucaj highlighted Corridor VIII as a strategic priority, connecting Albania to wider regional routes towards North Macedonia, Bulgaria and the Black Sea. The linking of Port of Durrës with Prishtina’s dry port is another important development underlining the contribution of Albania’s ports to regional development.

To advance these projects, she called on private companies, contractors and international partners to engage early in Albania’s infrastructure development through participation in tenders, engagement in investment, operations and/or subcontracting. She also stressed that EU support should reflect the wider European benefits of closing connectivity gaps across the Western Balkans.

Investment that connects opportunities



Ms. Manjani argued that connectivity must be understood as an economic and investment agenda, not merely a programme of different physical works. Railways, ports, digital networks and energy links, she said, create real value only when they connect businesses, investors, finance, skills and people across the region.

She presented the upcoming WB6–EU Investment Conference, *“The New Frontier,”* scheduled for 25–26 November 2026 in Tirana, as the practical platform for converting regional connectivity priorities into concrete partnerships and investments. The conference will bring together companies, commercial banks, international financial institutions and EU counterparts for sector-focused discussions and business-to-business matchmaking, including on railways, ports and other major infrastructure projects.



Manjani stressed that investments should generate value across the region rather than remain as isolated national projects. She pointed to the 10 memoranda of understanding signed for major infrastructure projects at the 2025 edition of the Investment Forum, noting that organisers and the European Commission are following up on their implementation. This year, the conference platform itself will serve as the main route for companies to present projects, identify partners and arrange meetings.

A dedicated Albania day will further connect SMEs and project promoters with commercial banks, international financial institutions and potential investors, reflecting the government's aim to ensure that investment opportunities reach the wider business community.

A shared regional agenda rather than a national one

Both deputy ministers underlined the need for a coordinated regional approach to infrastructure development. While Manjani emphasised the Conference's role in positioning the Western Balkans as a destination for investment that generates local and regional opportunities, Mucaj called for Albania and its neighbours to work with Italy, Greece and Bulgaria on a shared connectivity agenda rather than pursue fragmented national projects.

The overarching message was that connectivity must go beyond infrastructure itself: it must strengthen regional cooperation, attract investment and translate Albania's EU accession ambitions into tangible economic opportunities for businesses and citizens across the Western Balkans. Ms. Manjani invited rail actors to profit from the 2026 EU – WB6 Investment Forum to explore new opportunities especially with regard to Corridor VIII.

Connecting the South Adriatic: Turning railway investment into regional opportunities

The next stage of railway connectivity in the Western Balkans depends on more than building infrastructure. Projects must speed up their progress from planning to delivery, national networks must operate across borders, and businesses must be able to turn investment in rail into better transport services, economic opportunities and finally in improving their own bottom line.



This was the focus of a panel on the second day of the Tirana Connectivity Forum 2026, which brought together railway authorities from Albania and Montenegro, Italian regions of Puglia and Molise, EU INTERREG cooperation programmes representatives, international partners and private-sector actors.

From project pipelines to delivery

Albania's railways are being totally rebuilt. With more than 25 projects under way, covering lines, stations, electrification, signalling, telecommunications and operations. Chief Executive Ergys Verdho described the rail infrastructure programme as the backbone that will connect the country with the cross-border routes.



The first results are close. On the Tirana–Durrës–Airport line, civil works, station buildings, signalling and telecommunications are due to be completed by December 2026, or early 2027. Albanian Railways is already talking to private operators to speed up the implementation of operations phase, because running trains, not only building them, is the next challenge. Verdho acknowledged that Albania has little recent operating experience and wants to learn from EU partners. Passenger services readiness is targeted for late 2027 or the first quarter of 2028.

Helidon Lusha, Head of the Project Management and Implementation Unit at Albanian Railways, showed how these projects fit into a wider TEN-T project pipeline that makes Albania a gateway to the South East Europe rail network. This includes core links from Durrës towards Montenegro and North Macedonia, a connection to Vlorë and a new link from Shkodër to Pristina. The next big rail line is the Vorë–Hani i Hotit section towards Montenegro, a design-and-build package that includes signalling, telecommunications and electrification as well as civil works. Its procurement is nearly complete, with the contract expected to be closed this year and works starting in early 2027, financed by the EBRD, the EIB and an EU grant through the Western Balkans Investment Framework. Corridor 8 is moving too: the first phase, Durrës–Rrogozhinë, is in tender with a civil-works contract targeted for the fourth quarter of 2026, while Rrogozhinë–Pogradec segment is in detailed design.



For Montenegro, the priority is to develop railway connections as part of a wider regional network rather than as isolated national assets. Adrijana Uglik, Director of Investments and Foreign Placement Sector at the Railway Infrastructure of Montenegro (ZICG), identified three strategic directions of ZICG: the Bar–Podgorica–Serbia axis, the Podgorica–Tuzi connection with Albania, and the longer-term Podgorica–Nikšić–Bosnia and Herzegovina link. *"The common objective is not three isolated lines, but a more connected network linking the Adriatic with the regional and European markets,"* she said.

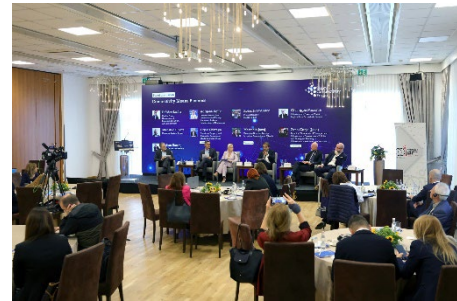


Montenegro has provisionally closed Chapter 21 on trans-European networks in March 2026, but implementation and monitoring continue. In that logic the national investment plans, EU requirements and cross-border operations must reinforce one another. Uglić also presented Montenegro's project pipeline as a market signal: projects are advancing through preparation, procurement and implementation in parallel, creating opportunities for designers, consultants, supervisors, contractors and system suppliers well before construction begins. *"Financing alone does not create business opportunities,"* she said, *"projects must be mature, procurement bankable and the promoter capable of implementation."*



Connecting national networks into a European corridor

Contributors and panelists stressed the need to align infrastructure with EU standards, including signalling and other operational standards across country borders. New lines alone will not deliver seamless connectivity if technical systems remain incompatible or links to ports, terminals and other transport modes are weak.



Giuseppe Macchia, Infrastructure Director, Puglia Region at the Rete Ferroviaria Italiana (RFI), stressed that an European corridor cannot be created simply by linking national networks: infrastructure managers, institutions and operators must align their investments as well. Following the 2024 revision of the TEN-T network, the Western Balkans–Eastern Mediterranean corridor now extends to Italy – hence the Adriatic



becomes a connecting link rather than a space separating two shores. RFI's current priorities are completing the network missing links, removing cross-border bottlenecks, modernising networks, improving interoperability and connecting ports, terminals and airports, with a gradual move towards further improvement of common technical and operational standards. *"Even a modern and efficient network loses much of its value if it reaches a border and encounters technical, operational or administrative barriers,"* he said. RFI offered its experience in network management, interoperability, digitalisation and capacity management to build stronger partnerships with infrastructure managers in the Western Balkans.

Italy's regional experience offers lessons for rail network modernization. Irene Di Tria, Director of the Mobility Infrastructure Office of the Puglia Region, continued the discussion by presenting investments aimed at bringing regional railways up to national and TEN-T standards. Under the 2021–2027 programming period and Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan, Puglia has been investing €845 million in infrastructure upgrades, signalling and safety systems, level-crossing removal and intermodal hubs.



Panellists agreed that railway investment should be planned around functioning corridors that link ports, logistics services and neighboring markets in the South Adriatic region. Better-connected networks can support freight, tourism and trade, and improve access to the region and to the European markets.

European cooperation must prepare rail actors for successful participation in rail-support programs

Turning regional priorities into deliverable projects requires coordinated planning and financing.

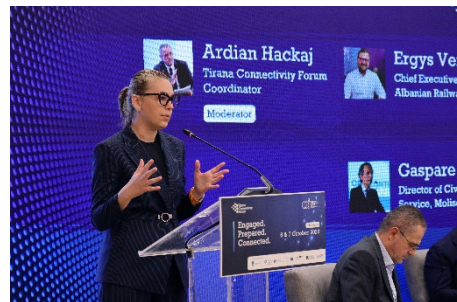
Claudio Polignano, Head of the Managing Authority of Interreg IPA South Adriatic, explained that while the programme cannot finance major railway infrastructure directly, it can address the practical barriers that stop infrastructure working across borders by harmonizing procedures, connecting institutions and operators, tackling bottlenecks and testing joint solutions. Polignano called for a post-2027 South Adriatic Connectivity Agenda to be built around integrated territorial connectivity, multimodal corridors, maritime links, the green transition, digital procedures, cybersecurity, border management and human capital. *“Physical infrastructure alone does not guarantee effective cross-border mobility,”* he said. European cooperation adds value by making infrastructure work better together and preparing the ground for larger financing through instruments such as the IPA Growth Plan, the Western Balkans Investment Framework and the Connecting Europe Facility.



Roberto D'Amico, Project Manager at the Molise Region, said the real question is how to turn connectivity priorities into projects that attract European funding. The whole endeavor starts with planning together he argued and should be based on a gap analysis, rather than inventing projects to fit a call for proposals. Interreg, as in the Co4Co project linking Italy, Albania and Montenegro, does not finance railway works but builds the ground for joint investment. Joint mature projects need a combination of instruments, from EU Interreg to Connecting Europe Facility (CEF)-distributed infrastructure funds, the Connecting Europe Facility, the Western Balkans Investment Framework and the Growth Plan, or national budgets because no single programme finances everything. He called for a common South Adriatic pipeline of projects, and on the need to also involve the private sector from the needs-analysis stage and treating resilience as an added value.



Daniela Gaćević, Head of Programme Department, Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) said that regional organisations need to remain involved in infrastructure planning, alongside efforts on skills, professional recognition, digital services, investment readiness and predictable regulation. She presented the RCC's Book of Opportunities, a pipeline of regional projects to be promoted at the EU-Western Balkans 6 Investment Forum, and noted that investors need stability, security and predictability.



Project procurement, risk management and resilience planning shape delivery

Even when financing is available, implementation can be held back by weak project preparation, unrealistic procurement conditions and limited coordination between public authorities and the market.

Miroslav Kučera of Aspiro, a Bratislava-based company that advises on procurement and implementation of projects financed by international financial institutions, named three recurring problems: i) un-synchronized timeframes between planning and procurement, which leave cost and technology assumptions outdated; ii) mismatched expectations between the public and private sides; and, iii) risk aversion that leads to over-constrained contracts, with heavy securities, tight deadlines and high penalties that push prices up. He welcomed the EBRD's requirement in place since 1 September, for market consultations before tenders, and urged authorities to publish procurement plans at the level of individual

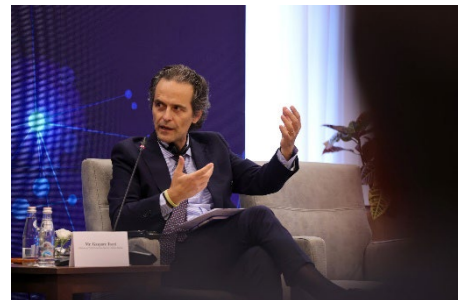


contracts, as the World Bank does, so the market can flag problems early. Bundling civil works with signalling may raise security concerns or limit financing. He illustrated this approach with a recent consultation process for Montenegro's passenger rolling stock that showed that refurbishment would cost 80% of the cost of acquiring new cars (rather than the 50% as initially expected). He recommended for contracts that can be adjusted more flexibly during implementation.

Ogert Shkrepa, Director of Property and Guarantee Department at SIGAL Insurance Group, representing the insurance sector, said Albanian insurers are already prepared to support large projects and have insured projects worth up to €1.5 billion, backed by reinsurers including Munich Re, Swiss Re and Hannover Re. Under Albanian law, projects must be insured with or through an Albanian insurer. Insurers can offer precious advice in all stages of PCM: from design through procurement, construction and operation, he said, covering bonds, construction and delay in start-up risks and, for an electrified railway, cyber risk. Early risk assessment helps lenders and contractors, and claims paid within 30 days avoid project delays.



Resilience, panelists noted, is becoming systemically important to the reliability of transport links. Gaspare Tocci, Director of the Civil Protection Service of the Molise Region, described how flooding and a landslide in March 2026 damaged road and railway connections in lower Molise and interrupted the Adriatic high-speed corridor. Interreg-funded monitoring tools, satellite data, sensors and civil-protection platforms, he said, helped the region anticipate risks and coordinate the emergency response. Tocci argued that resilience should sit alongside efficiency in the key performance indicators used to plan and assess infrastructure, so that a network can take over the load when one link fails.



Investment and reforms must advance together

For businesses, an integrated railway network brings both new opportunities and new requirements.

Marinela Jazoj, Executive Director of the Foreign Investors Association of Albania, said connectivity depends on an entire business ecosystem, including railway operators, engineering firms, consultants and technology providers. The investment pipeline and the reform pipeline, she



underlined, must advance together: infrastructure cannot deliver its full benefits without capable institutions, interoperable systems and businesses prepared to operate within an integrated European network.

Zana Guzja, Director of Transport and Infrastructure Development Policies and Strategies at Albania's Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy, reinforced the importance of regional coordination, of mature project preparation, of blended financing and private-sector participation. Predictable rules and well-structured risk arrangements, she said, are vital to attract companies and move investments from planning to implementation. She added that Chapter 21 is not only about legislation, since the 2024 TEN-T regulation is already fully transposed, but about investment in transport infrastructure, and that its closure will mainly serve the private sector and citizens.



The discussions at TCF26 reinforced a common conclusion: railway connectivity will deliver results only when infrastructure investment, European cooperation, institutional reform and private-sector engagement advance together. For Albania, Montenegro and Italy rail authorities, the task ahead is to turn individual projects into a connected, resilient and interoperable regional network that supports trade, investment and the Western Balkans' path towards EU membership.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Built upon the “Engaged. Prepared. Connected.” concept, TCF 2026 focused on what it takes for the SEE6 to move from preparation to delivery on the EU accession path.

The Forum brought together EU and Western Balkans politicians, policy-makers, civil society, regional organisations and business actors to reflect and to chart the course ahead, with a focus on EU Enlargement frontrunners: Albania and Montenegro.

“Accession before Membership” is becoming the operating logic of enlargement: candidates earn tangible access to EU markets, programs and policies as they deliver, while full membership remains the final goal. The test is no longer whether reform agendas exist, but whether governments can implement them, verify results and show tangible benefits to citizens and businesses. Gradual integration offers a practical route to bring EU benefits forward, but it must remain merit-based, conditional and reversible. It should reinforce, rather than replace, the goal of full EU membership.

The Reform and Growth Facility is shifting EU support towards verified results. Its success will depend on clear ownership, realistic planning, reliable evidence, timely verification and accountability, including oversight by civil society and business. Weak project preparation and delays in WBIF-funded infrastructure remain the main risks.

Infrastructure must be completed, connected and operational to create value. Projects approved before maturity, procurement delays and missing cross-border links undermine both economic returns and the region’s 2030 TEN-T objective.

The Common Regional Market outcomes will be judged at the border crossings. Businesses need faster transit times, harmonised procedures, digital documentation, mutual recognition and lower compliance costs. Implementation, not declarations, will determine its credibility.

Rail connectivity requires regional interoperability. Albania, Montenegro and Italy must align infrastructure, technical standards, procurement and port and logistics links. Isolated national projects will not produce functioning and efficient European corridors. Investment and reform must advance together. Bankable projects, predictable procurement, well-structured risks and early private-sector engagement are essential to move initiatives from planning to delivery.

“EU integration will be measured by delivery. Reforms must be implemented, infrastructure must connect markets, regional barriers must fall, and benefits must be visible before full EU membership”, is the overall message of TCF 2026.



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