

Author: Đorđe Dimitrov, Researcher, European Policy Centre - CEP, Belgrade

Unpacking the 2024 Enlargement Package

A New Momentum or Business as Usual?

With the enlargement momentum still present in the Western Balkans (WB), the European Union's commitment to the process remains steadfast despite the complex challenges facing Europe. The official adoption of the [Growth Plan for the Western Balkans](#) represents a key strategic initiative aimed at accelerating reforms and fostering deeper integration with the EU, giving additional boost to the process. In this context, a European Policy Centre (CEP) hosted a [webinar](#) titled *Discussing the 2024 Enlargement Package & Functioning of Democratic Institutions in the Western Balkans* brought together key stakeholders to examine the region's progress towards the EU and challenges on their membership path. It included the participation of high-profile speakers, such as Gert Jan Koopman, Director-General of the European Commission's DG for Neighbourhood and Enlargement; Miia Lahti, Director of the Unit for South-Eastern Europe and EU Enlargement of Finland's Ministry for Foreign Affairs; and representatives from the Think for Europe Network (TEN), who assessed the current state of affairs in the WB's enlargement path. Moreover, Miloš Pavković presented findings from the [project](#) *Towards Better Monitoring of Democracy in the Western Balkans*, which examined the European Commission's reporting on the

Functioning of Democratic Institutions (FoDI), offering evidence-based insights into democratic governance in the region. This [research](#), funded by the Kalevi Sorsa Foundation, underscores the critical importance of strengthening democratic institutions as a cornerstone of the accession process. By fostering dialogue and presenting actionable insights, the event assessed the WB progress and the potential of the Growth Plan to serve as a catalyst for reforms, sustaining the momentum of enlargement and advancing the Western Balkans' European aspirations.



The Commission's Perspective on the Western Balkans' Progress

From the European Commission's point of view, the [latest progress reports](#) indicate that the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans has accelerated significantly, with tangible progress made in meeting key benchmarks. Albania opened Cluster 1 and is on track to open Cluster 6 soon, marking a significant step forward in its accession journey. Bosnia and Herzegovina has officially commenced accession negotiations, highlighting its commitment to EU membership. Montenegro has met interim benchmarks in the Rule of Law chapters and is set to close four negotiation chapters in December, demonstrating robust progress. For Serbia, the European Commission continues to argue that it has achieved readiness to open Cluster 3. Additionally, the Commission has endorsed Montenegro and Albania's timelines for concluding negotiations, targeting 2026 and 2027, respectively. Kosovo has also made notable strides, securing visa-free travel for its citizens. All this signals a significant acceleration in enlargement progress as tangible results can clearly be identified. Such an overall state of play represents proof that the so-called "enlargement momentum" is more than just words.

In an attempt to maintain the momentum, the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans has emerged as an important mechanism for accelerating the region's EU accession process through gradual integration and enhanced cooperation. Aiming to foster faster economic convergence of the WB with the EU, the plan has already been put into action. Notably, all Western Balkan partners (except Bosnia and Herzegovina) adopted comprehensive Reform Agendas in record time, reflecting strong regional commitment to the Growth Plan's objectives. These agendas, subsequently endorsed by the European Commission, have been assessed as good. In support of these efforts, Western Balkan leaders have committed to meeting quarterly to review the Growth Plan's implementation and address emerging challenges collaboratively. This regular dialogue underscores the region's collective determination to advance its European integration. With such progress, the key benchmark to assess the Growth Plan's success will be the actual implementation of the commitments undertaken as part of the Reform Agendas, set between 2024 and 2027.

While the European Commission has recognised the significant progress achieved by the WB6 regarding their EU integration process, it has also highlighted some key setbacks that continue to impede the region's accession trajectory. Alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy remains an issue in the case of Serbia, which is demonstrating a particularly low level of alignment. Challenges in the areas of the rule of law, democratic governance, and the fight against corruption persist, particularly in Serbia, Albania, and Kosovo. Moreover, progress in the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina has been limited, further complicating the EU accession process of the two sides. North Macedonia faces the pressing challenge of

In an attempt to maintain the momentum, the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans has emerged as an important mechanism for accelerating the region's EU accession process through gradual integration and enhanced cooperation. Aiming to foster faster economic convergence of the WB with the EU, the plan has already been put into action. Notably, all Western Balkan partners (except Bosnia and Herzegovina) adopted comprehensive Reform Agendas in record time, reflecting strong regional commitment to the Growth Plan's objectives.

constitutional amendments to address longstanding issues with Bulgaria, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Reform Agenda has yet to be adopted, stalling not just progress, but also the funds foreseen by the Growth Plan. Meanwhile, the Council has not yet requested the European Commission's opinion on Kosovo's application for EU membership, delaying further integration steps. Given the identified issues, adhering to the conditionality set by the Growth Plan will be essential to sustaining the momentum of enlargement and ensuring meaningful reforms across the region.

Western Balkans Think Tank See the Reports Differently

From the perspective of think tanks, the European Commission's endorsement of Montenegro's 2026 and Albania's 2027 [target dates](#) for concluding accession negotiations appears inconsistent with the actual progress outlined in the latest reports. The Montenegro report does not reflect the level of advancement that has been publicly emphasised in official statements. Superficial moves, such as partial reforms in Public Administration Reform, are framed as significant progress, painting an overly optimistic picture of the situation on the ground. Similarly, in Albania, the ambition to conclude negotiations by 2027 is not mirrored by the pace of reforms. Progress has been recorded in only four negotiation chapters, while no advancements were observed in another four, suggesting that reforms are moving at a slower pace than the declared timeline demands. These discrepancies raise concerns about the feasibility of achieving the ambitious goals set by both countries. Despite the rhetoric of high-level officials, the actual level of preparedness and progress indicates that EU accession may be further away than portrayed. As such, the target dates for concluding negotiations appear more aspirational than realistic.

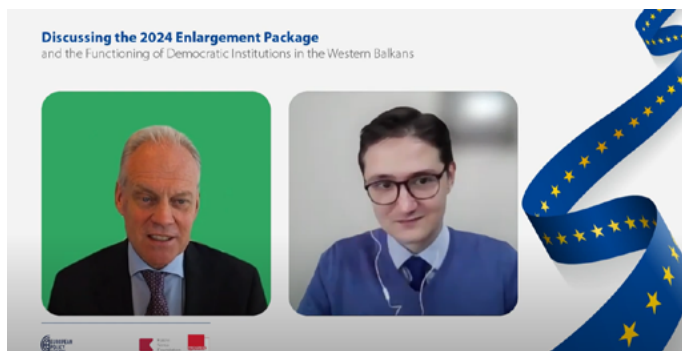
When it comes to the rest of the Western Balkans, the region continues to grapple with longstanding endemic problems, highlighting a lack of recognition of the renewed momentum in the EU enlargement process. From the perspective of think tanks, there are no clear “front-runners” among the WB6, as all countries exhibit similar levels of progress, or lack thereof, in their EU accession efforts. Bosnia and Herzegovina’s level of preparedness remains stagnant in 33 chapters, with no progress recorded in 20 of them. Serbia’s underperformance is evident, with only a half-point improvement in preparedness across four chapters. North Macedonia showed slight improvement, with most chapters assessed at the higher end of the moderate preparedness scale. Meanwhile, Kosovo presents a mixed picture, with good assessments in four chapters but limited progress in 17. Overall, the latest reports suggest that the WB6 level of progress did not significantly change, with reforms advancing at a sluggish pace. Thus, at this rate, the WB6 is risking wasting the momentum. To move closer to accession, the WB6 must demonstrate stronger political will and implement more meaningful reforms, ensuring alignment with the EU’s expectations and the renewed emphasis on enlargement.

When it comes to the rest of the Western Balkans, the region continues to grapple with longstanding endemic problems, highlighting a lack of recognition of the renewed momentum in the EU enlargement process. From the perspective of think tanks, there are no clear “front-runners” among the WB6, as all countries exhibit similar levels of progress, or lack thereof, in their EU accession efforts.

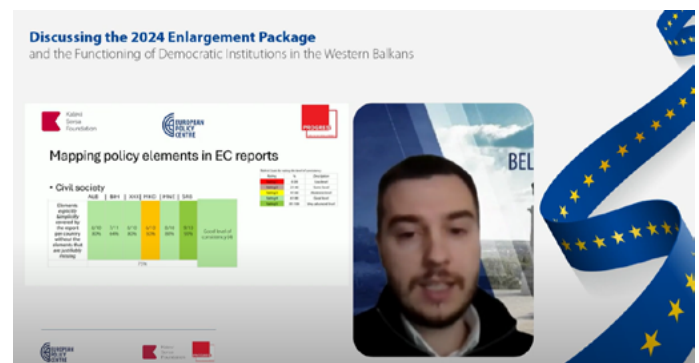
To move closer to accession, the WB6 must demonstrate stronger political will and implement more meaningful reforms, ensuring alignment with the EU’s expectations and the renewed emphasis on enlargement.

...and the Assessment of the Functioning of Democratic Institutions

The 2024 European Commission report introduced several changes that mark a step forward in the quality of reporting compared to previous editions. For the first time, elements of qualitative assessment are discernible in the area of the *Functioning of Democratic Institutions*, suggesting a shift towards nuanced and assessment-oriented evaluations. Seven different qualitative grades have been identified, ranging from severely hampered to satisfactory (see Table 1). Additionally, the report has undergone substantial revisions, most notably with the introduction of a new pillar focused on EU integration, reflecting an evolving framework that aligns with the region’s accession priorities. Moreover, the report is shorter and more precise, addressing concerns over excessive technical detail raised in earlier iterations. All these novelties and refinements indicate a responsiveness to recommendations from the European Policy Centre (CEP). However, there remains room for further enhancement based on CEP’s recommendations. These include incorporating the subchapter *Civilian Oversight of the Security and Intelligence Sector* in all reports and placing greater emphasis on explicit reporting of policy elements that have a direct impact and significant implications for democratic functioning, as well as the inclusion of new elements. Such efforts will not only increase the quality and relevance of the reports but also strengthen their role as tools for monitoring and guiding the region’s European integration journey.



Screenshot from discussion. Source: CEP’s YouTube



Screenshot from discussion. Source: CEP’s YouTube

Table 1. Identified FoDI assessment grades scale¹

Severely hampered (Turkiye)	●
FoDI undermined (BIH)	○
FoDI affected by challenges (Georgia, Kosovo)	○
Mixed track record (Serbia)	○
Partially satisfactory (Albania)	○
Mostly satisfactory (Moldova, North Macedonia)	○
Satisfactory (Montenegro)	○



¹ These qualitative assessments are not included in the EC’s official methodology. Whether the Commission will adhere to this methodology remains to be seen and will become clearer with the release of the 2025 annual reports.

About European Policy Centre - CEP

European Policy Centre - CEP - is a non-governmental, non-profit, independent think tank, based in Belgrade. It was founded by a group of professionals in the areas of EU law, EU affairs, economics and public administration reform, with a shared vision of changing the policy making environment in Serbia for the better – by rendering it more evidence based, more open and inclusive and more substantially EU accession driven. Profound understanding of EU policies and the accession process, the workings of the Serbian administration, as well as strong social capital combine to create a think tank capable of not only producing high quality research products but also penetrating the decision making arena to create tangible impact. Today, CEP organises its work into four programme areas:

- 1) Good Governance
- 2) Internal Market and Competitiveness
- 3) Regional Policy, Networks and Energy
- 4) Our Europe

For more information, please visit: www.cep.org.rs.