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# EU-Western Balkans Summit – breaking the stalemate: women, youth, justice and enlargement

EVENT REPORT

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# Event report

## Introduction: EU offers Western Balkans new incentives for reform on the road to membership

The 2023 EU-Western Balkans Summit provided the strongest evidence so far that **geopolitics has given new momentum to the European Union’s long-stalled enlargement process**. The European Commission and member states are determined to do more to help the six Western Balkan countries achieve their ambitions to join the EU, provided the aspirants step up their own reforms. The spirit of ‘more for more’ characterised an intensive day of debate, with pointed reminders from experts, activists and citizens of how much remains to be done.

Russia’s war of aggression on Ukraine has injected new geopolitical urgency into the snail’s-pace accession process. The Commission is proposing to put more money on the table as an incentive for economic reforms and regional market integration, with the prospect of partial access to the EU’s internal market before full membership. Ukraine’s EU candidacy has created both a stimulus and a potential rival for Western Balkans countries, which fear being overtaken or forgotten.

Ministers from several Western Balkan countries spoke at Friends of Europe’s 7 December summit and expressed their determination and recognition of the more receptive mood in the EU, tinged with frustration at the perceived unfairness of what moderator and Senior Fellow for Peace, Security & Defence at Friends of Europe **Jamie Shea** called the “long and winding road” to membership. The United States reaffirmed its longstanding support for the inclusion of all Western Balkan countries in the EU.

**Three expert panels highlighted the big changes needed to dismantle state capture, uphold the rule of law, increase the economic and political role of women and prevent young people from emigrating in droves to seek a better future in the EU.** Persistent border and political disputes, widespread corruption and impunity continue to hold back regional integration and economic development. Youth leaders from the region expressed both their desire for better education and employment to keep young people at home and their despair at the lack of change.

The annual summit took place days before EU and Western Balkan leaders were to meet in Brussels in the run-up to a landmark European Council summit due to decide on Commission recommendations to start negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova and Bosnia & Herzegovina, and grant candidate status to Georgia. This would be the first time the EU has opened accession talks with a country at war.

**It is vital that the EU demonstrates its determination to reboot enlargement as the bloc's most successful policy to spread stability and prosperity across the continent.** Member states must also show willingness to work in parallel on institutional and policy reforms needed to equip the Union to absorb the Western Balkan countries as well as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia in the coming decade, once they meet the strict conditions for membership.

Both sides need to reframe their approach to the accession process. It must be driven by sustained political momentum, with regular top-level check-ins and tangible rewards for progress, and not reduced to a bureaucratic exercise as has

## “ *Enlargement is back* ”

Gert Jan Koopman

happened too often over the past decade. **That means EU leaders must also have the courage to explain the benefits and strategic value of enlargement to their own citizens and resist nationalist headwinds in Europe.**

The summit was supported by the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Children's Fund, the US Mission to the European Union and the Albanian Helsinki Committee.

## Enlargement is back, really

**Gert Jan Koopman**, the European Commission's new Director-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), declared in a keynote address to the opening session. “Enlargement is really back,” he repeated, acknowledging widespread cynicism in the region 20 years after Western Balkan countries were given a ‘European perspective’ by an EU summit in Thessaloniki, Greece.

Koopman said member states understood now that the biggest investment they could make in their own stability and security was to take in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo\* , Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, once they fulfil the conditions for membership. Moreover, the Commission and EU capitals were ready to give the candidates greater practical help, financial support and a political presence during EU deliberations. “We have left the Western Balkans alone too much. That's our fault also,” he acknowledged.

The Commission's €6bn Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, announced by President Ursula von der Leyen during a tour of the region, offers extra funds for economic development provided countries adopt key reforms and overcome 'poisonous relationships' that continue to hold back regional market integration. Koopman said normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo\* would be a condition for those countries to access the growth plan.

He acknowledged that conditions for joining the EU have gotten tougher. "The bar for enlargement policy has been too low over the last decade," Koopman said.

Czech Europe Minister **Martin Dvořák** said his own country had benefited from the extension of stability and prosperity in the EU's 'Big Bang' eastward enlargement in 2004 and wanted to extend that zone to encompass all of Europe. "We cannot afford to have an unstable area so close to the Union," he said of the Western Balkans. But he stressed enlargement was a merit-based process and applicant countries had to meet demanding standards.

In a guest address by video link, Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration **Olha Stefanishyna** vowed to work together with Western Balkan nations to share best practices and support each other's accession paths. "We enlargement countries can drive the enlargement process ourselves," she said, noting that Ukraine was pressing ahead with reforms to adopt EU standards even as it fought to defend its freedom and independence.

## Iron doors will open

Ministers from several Western Balkan countries expressed their determination to rise to the challenge of reforming their economies, state administrations and legal systems, as well as fighting against corruption to qualify for membership in the coming years.

Montenegro's European Affairs Minister, **Maida Gorčević**, said her country, the only one to have opened all negotiating chapters, was once again "the most suitable candidate for next member of the EU" after the new government and parliament broke a deadlock on appointing Supreme Court judges, unblocking the way for a cascade of overdue judicial and rule-of-law reforms.

North Macedonia's Foreign Minister, **Bujar Osmani**, while lamenting the many obstacles Skopje had faced on its European path, said: "The thick iron doors of the EU open at certain geopolitical momentums, and shortly, and enter those who are ready or readier." Western Balkan countries together formed a small grey patch the size of Romania in the middle of the blue map of the EU. If neglected, this wound in the European body would fester and bleed, he said.



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1. **Christopher Hill**, U.S. Ambassador to Serbia and negotiator of the Dayton Agreement
2. **Maida Gorčević**, Montenegrin Minister of European Affairs and **Bujar Osmani** Minister of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia
3. **Steliana Nadera**, Manager at the Istanbul Regional Hub of the UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and Central Asia
4. Opening session on the EU enlargement
5. **Gert Jan Koopman**, European Commission Director-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations and Jamie Shea, Friends of Europe Senior Fellow)



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*“The thick iron doors of the EU open at certain geopolitical momentums, and shortly, and enter those who are ready or readier*

**Bujar Osmani, North Macedonia’s Foreign Minister**

Osmani suggested three pillars for what he called a paradigm shift in the way in which the EU treats candidate countries that would make the accession process more tangible: sitting together around the table in political formats; gradual economic integration into the single market as they meet the criteria; and eligibility for EU structural and cohesion funds before full membership.

If that approach were taken, the eventual accession of Western Balkans countries would not make headlines and face public opposition, he said.

Albanian Foreign Minister **Igli Hasani** dismissed any status short of full EU accession, saying Albania was focused on becoming a member “without ifs or buts”. He urged Western Balkan countries to follow the example of France and Germany in putting a bloody past behind them.

Veteran Balkan negotiator **Christopher Hill**, now the US Ambassador to Serbia, said that if the EU resisted the headwinds of nationalism and stuck to its commitment to support and admit Ukraine and the other candidates, “this too will be considered one of Europe’s finest hours.” He urged Western Balkan countries to support each other on the path to EU membership rather than reheating historic grievances. “One thing these countries need to be convinced of is that this enlargement phase has to be for real,” he said.

## **Geopolitics won’t get you through the door**

While EU speakers insisted on the need for Western Balkan countries to align fully with EU foreign policy, notably Serbia, which has refused to join Western sanctions against Russia, Hill stressed that Belgrade was quietly being far more helpful to Ukraine than was widely known. “Serbia is doing a lot for Ukraine, a lot. People who don’t know about it should know, but please be quiet about it.”

Two veteran EU specialists on the region, former enlargement commissioner **Štefan Füle** and **Miroslav Lajčák**, EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue at the EEAS, urged the Western Balkans to take advantage of the light at the end of the EU tunnel that now existed due to Russia’s war on Ukraine.

## *“ Geopolitics has opened the door, but geopolitics won’t get you through the door*”

**Miroslav Lajčák, EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue at the EEAS**

Lajčák told the candidate countries. “In the more than 20 years I have been dealing with the Balkans, I see for the first time the EU more ready for the Balkans than the Balkans are ready for the EU,” he said, urging the aspirants to overcome democratic backsliding, corruption and bilateral disputes, which remained a serious threat to their prospects.

He listed a series of issues that needed to be resolved to keep the enlargement process on track: reform of EU institutions to prepare for enlargement; more majority voting to facilitate decisions; addressing the budget and financing implications, given the huge estimated cost of admitting Ukraine alone under current EU policies; guaranteeing respect of the rule of law; ensuring that bilateral issues, such as normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo\*, do not block progress; and taking the key decisions before the European Parliament election campaign.

Füle said European politicians who proclaimed they were staunch supporters of enlargement but also wanted to keep national vetoes on EU decision-making were not being honest. “He’s either lying about the first, or he’s lying about the second.” The reality was that the EU had stopped the engine of enlargement because it was not ready to accept new members without internal reform. He urged the next European Commission president to declare enlargement a top priority and appoint two vice-presidents for enlargement and for institutional reform of the EU to ensure that those two processes advance in parallel.

### **Light and shadow in justice reforms**

An all-women panel on justice reform was held as part of Friends of Europe’s brand-new initiative, [Shared Justice](#), developed in cooperation with the Albanian Helsinki Committee, to shed light on the effective instruments and tools that need to be followed and models that need to be avoided to make a significant contribution to justice reform in Western Balkans. The panel heard encouraging accounts of Albania’s root-and-branch shake-out of judges and prosecutors leading to more prosecutions of high-level corruption and organised crime. However, speakers reported backsliding on the rule of law in North Macedonia and entrenched state capture in Serbia, where a facade of justice reforms had not broken a culture of impunity.



Albanian former deputy justice minister and 2020-2021 European Young Leader (EYL40) **Fjoralba Caka** said the deepest-ever justice reform launched in 2016 had flushed out corrupt judges and insulated the judiciary from subordination to the executive, making it self-governing and accountable to citizens. **Etilda Gjonaj**, an Albanian Member of Parliament and former justice minister, said 57% of judges and prosecutors had either been replaced or had withdrawn during an internationally supervised vetting process. She insisted the reform had produced “amazing results”, including the investigation of a former deputy prime minister, but she acknowledged that “perceptions don’t change immediately.”

**Lenche Ristoska**, a former special prosecutor in North Macedonia whose office was shut down, said she had witnessed the “recapture of the state” by new political elites. Parliament had shortened sentences for corruption, meaning the statute of limitations applied sooner and many investigations had to be dropped. Ristoska, who is now North Macedonia’s Liaison Prosecutor at Eurojust, recounted personal experiences of being refused evidence by official bodies, threatened by politicians and her own superiors, and denied promotions. “The system took revenge on people who were not compliant. In the judiciary at the top level there are people who work without integrity,” she said.

Serbian civil society activist **Jelena Pejić Nikić**, a senior researcher at the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, said problems of state capture were not limited to the judiciary and extended to Serbia’s security institutions, police and media. “To perpetuate state capture, you’ve got to remain in power. And all methods are being used to keep the ruling elite in power,” she said. Serbia’s judicial reform, enacted to satisfy the EU and the Council of Europe, was a move in the right direction, but there was still no political will to reform the justice system and remove political influence.

**“ To perpetuate state capture, you’ve got to remain in power. And all methods are being used to keep the ruling elite in power**

**Jelena Pejić Nikić, a senior researcher at the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy**

The speakers insisted on the importance of appointing and promoting independent judges and prosecutors on merit and with integrity. They also advocated building on public support for the rule of law in civil society, among women and young people angered by corruption who could be mobilised by scandals or incidents, such as two mass shootings in Serbia.

## Balkan Journey

As part of its Balkan Journey initiative, Friends of Europe’s [Working Group on women’s economic empowerment](#) presented recommendations to promote digitalisation and skills among women, enhance women’s ownership rights, increase women’s access to financing and change the way budgets were drafted and women’s rights were addressed across the region. The report reflects the outcome of meetings in four cities in the region in 2022 and 2023 focusing on women’s role in agriculture and rural areas, labour market access and services, and gender-responsive budgeting.

**Steliana Nadera**, Manager at the Istanbul Regional Hub of the UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and Central Asia urged the European Commission to use the recommendations in its roadmap for enlargement in the Western Balkans to assess the capacity of the reform agendas put forward by the governments in the region to “pick up the opportunities that the women can bring to the market, the opportunities that women can bring to the GDP growth.” **Tamara Srzentić**, former minister of public administration in Montenegro and 2022 EYL40, spoke of the importance of creating safe spaces for women to share experiences, build confidence and share new tools, learning how to embrace failure on the road to success.

**Vlora Nushi**, Head of the UN Women office in Kosovo\*, welcomed the EU’s Growth Plan but asked: “Who is safeguarding the inclusivity of this package?” How would women be engaged in the planning and spending of the money, given that they account for only 35% of the workforce in the Western Balkans and are often sidelined into the care sector. She said it was essential to address women’s property rights and lack of land ownership in the region.

### “ Who is safeguarding the inclusivity of this package?

**Vlora Nushi, Head of the UN Women office in Kosovo\***

**Marija Risteska**, Policy Coordinator for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) Business Programme, said the EBRD was working to promote a gender-responsive investment climate in the region by breaking biases in lending and creating specific financial instruments targeted at women.

## The voice of youth

A panel of youth representatives chosen by UNICEF said that too many in their generation were emigrating to study and seek work in the EU, causing a massive ‘brain drain’ due to the lack of opportunity, outdated education systems and the lack of economic reform in their home countries.

**Maja Ibričić**, a PhD student from Bosnia & Herzegovina, pointed to recent femicides in her country and said women’s fundamental rights were as important as economic empowerment. “It’s not always about the money. It’s about the dignity. It’s about feeling safe and appreciated in your homeland.”

**Klara Dragović**, a graphic design student from Montenegro, said there was no career advice in high school. “The Montenegrin education system has to be reformed. The results of the PISA tests are bad – below average. That is the main reason why people of my age are looking to study abroad and I’m one of them too. Nothing has changed.”

Summing up the mood of many of the youth representatives, **Anisija Ugrinovska**, president of ODAS, a high school and university organisation, said young people did not feel protected and respected in their own country. “You are living in the time of our generation, but our generation is living in the time of your decisions,” she told the country’s leaders.

*“ You are living in the time of our generation, but our generation is living in the time of your decisions ”*

**Vlora Nushi, Head of the UN Women office in Kosovo\***

The voices of youth leaders were in turn uplifting and worrying, highlighting the gulf between the aspirations of the younger generation in the Western Balkans and the realities in their countries as they cool their heels in the antechamber to the European Union.

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\* For the United Nations, references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).



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1. **Štefan Füle**, Former EU commissioner for enlargement and European neighbourhood policy and former special envoy to the OSCE and the Western Balkans and Trustee at Friends of Europe
2. Launch of the Report on Women's Economic Empowerment in the Western Balkans
3. **Olha Stefanishyna**, Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration
4. **Miroslav Lajčák**, EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue at the European External Action Service (EEAS) and Trustee of Friends of Europe
5. **Fjoralba Caka**, Professor of EU Law at the University of Tirana, former Albanian deputy minister of justice and 2020-2021 European Young Leader (EYL40), **Lenche Ristoska**, Liaison Prosecutor for North Macedonia at EUROJUST, and **Etilda Gjonaj** Member of the Albanian Parliament and former Albanian minister of justice



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