

EU-Western Balkans Summit: Enlargement matters – Europe's new geopolitical, security and economic frontier

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Event report

Introduction

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has injected new momentum into the European Union’s enlargement process which had been stagnant since Croatia joined in 2013.

Ukraine’s appeal for EU membership gave new life to long-standing applications from the Western Balkans and raised awareness among existing members that enlargement is key to securing stability in the east and southeast of the continent.

Some EU hopefuls have moved forward quickly – Montenegro and Albania hope to join before the end of the decade. Others are held back by domestic complications or quarrels with member states.

Thirty years since the Dayton Accords ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Friends of Europe’s annual EU-Western Balkans Summit, held 3-4 December 2025, gathered senior decision makers and opinion leaders from candidate countries, the EU and beyond to assess ways ahead for the region.

Threatened by Kremlin bellicosity and a capricious White House, Europe could get a much-needed boost from enlargement – cementing democratic values in the region, building a bulwark against hostile outside influences, opening up market opportunities and boosting the EU’s voice in the world.

Yet, as it emerged from the high-level roundtable preceding the summit, “enlargement that produces a Europe united, democratic and free has never been so much needed, but achieving it may never have been so complicated.”

With over 230 participants in person and hundreds more online, the Summit explored solutions to geopolitical constraints and internal obstacles to enlargement – from persuading sceptical voters to re-wiring the EU so that a surge in new members does not short-circuit current institutions.

It assessed the economic implications of enlargement, rule of law considerations and examined how integration of candidate countries into European structures can progress in parallel with the adhesion negotiations.

Eastward Ho!

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and hybrid aggression towards the European Union itself has put wind in the sails of an enlargement process that has languished for years in the doldrums.

“The political imperative to get the Western Balkans inside the European Union is much more obvious today among the leaders. It is not anymore a question of ‘whether’, it’s a question of ‘how’ this is going to be done,” **Christian Danielsson**,

Swedish State Secretary for EU Affairs, told the Summit. “The reason for this is the Russian aggression. The reason for this is also the geopolitical reality.”

Many speakers agreed that Europe must take this opportunity to stabilise its eastern and south-eastern flank by embracing Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkan candidates as new members.

“This year, we really do have a chance. There is this window of opportunity, a geopolitical window of opportunity with what has happened in the European continent, in the world,” said **Valbona Zeneli**, Senior Fellow for Peace, Security and Defence at Friends of Europe, Senior Fellow at Europe Center and Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, Atlantic Council of the United States. “The doors have opened politically because both the Commission and member states are talking about enlargement seriously.”

So far, however, the picture has been mixed for Balkan candidates.

Some have made rapid headway: Montenegro has realistic hopes of joining in 2028, while Albania aims to enter the EU by the end of the decade. “2025 has been an incredible year for enlargement, has been an incredible year for Albania. We are extremely happy,” said a speaker at the Summit’s dinner session.

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Valbona Zeneli, Senior Fellow for Peace, Security and Defence at Friends of Europe

Beyond the Balkans, Moldova’s pro-Western government has made significant progress, while Ukraine’s bid remains central to the renewed push for enlargement.

“Ukraine is going to define our civilisation for the next century,” said a dinner speaker. “We live in an era where the Balkans are not really the top story in Europe. It’s a place called Ukraine,” they said. “If we get Ukraine wrong, we’re going to get a lot of things wrong and we’re going to have a very difficult time recovering.”

The membership bids of other Balkan countries remain hamstrung by domestic difficulties or international disputes.

North Macedonia has been stymied by objections from its EU neighbour Bulgaria. Serbia, meanwhile, is frustrated by setbacks related to EU doubts over the rule of law, corruption and democratic standards, as well as its relations with Russia.

Intervening during the opening session of the Summit, **Ana Brnabić**, President of the National Assembly of Serbia and former prime minister of Serbia, was vocal about the frustrations felt by countries like Serbia and North Macedonia. While the European Commission is perceived as a credible and reliable partner, she challenged the logic of the process and how it applies to EU member states. “It’s not merit based [...] I fail to understand the logic of the process,” she said. “We want to join the club, and the club can set its own conditions. Again, I will reiterate, the conditions

we have right now are deeply unfair. The process is completely unpredictable and with constantly changing goalposts.”

“It’s not merit based [...] I fail to understand the logic of the process.

Ana Brnabić, President of the National Assembly of Serbia and former prime minister of Serbia

Other speakers from Serbia insisted Belgrade is working to meet Brussels’ rule of law concerns and is shifting away from Moscow. “Nowadays we are witnessing the most serious and structural erosion of Serbian-Russian ties in the recent history”, participants heard at the pre-summit policymakers’ dinner.

Waiting to pounce

Interventions from candidate countries and within the EU warned that failure to take advantage of the current window of opportunity risked creating deep frustration among citizens in the Balkans, fuelling anti-Western sentiment, resuscitating radical nationalism, and opening spaces for criminal networks and hostile foreign forces.

“What I’m afraid of is what might happen to the region in the future,” acknowledged **Aleksandar Nikолоски**, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Transport of the Republic of North Macedonia and 2022 European Young Leader (EYL40). “There are still forces in the region which are very, very powerful. They are just waiting to find the moment, or the momentum to seize the power. They have a completely different vision, and they are just waiting for the process to fail [...] I’m very afraid for the region.”

There were calls for EU members to see the bigger picture and remove hurdles to enlargement based on historical bilateral gripes.

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“We don’t like bilateralisation. It’s not fair. It undermines the merit-based approach,” stated **Heleen Bakker**, Director-General for European Cooperation at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “In our view, if you keep the accession process hostage because you have an issue with your neighbours, that should be resolved in a different manner.”

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From left to right:

1. **Thomas Hagleitner**, Head of Unit, Enlargement Strategy and Coordination, European Commission Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood (ENESE); **Štefan Füle**, Former Special Envoy to the OSCE and the Western Balkans, former European Commissioner, and Trustee of Friends of Europe
2. **Štefan Füle**; **Aleksandar Nikoloski**, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Transport of the Republic of North Macedonia and 2022 European Young Leader (EYL40)
3. **Gerlinde Niehus**, Independent NATO and International Security Expert
4. **Ana Brnabić**, President of the National Assembly of Serbia and former Prime Minister of Serbia

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Heleen Bakker, Director-General for European Cooperation at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The danger of hostile players preying on countries left vulnerable by frustrated EU adhesion bids is real.

“There are actors that see the power of the region. China, Russia and the Middle East are getting in there really quickly, and thick and fast in terms of infrastructure projects. Money is cheap, opportunities are being given without any of the conditionality that we in the EU are creating in the process of enlargement,” noted Dharmendra Kanani, Chief Operating Officer and Chief Spokesperson of Friends of Europe.

Cristina Gherasimov, Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration of Moldova and Chief Negotiator with the EU, recalled how voters in her country had weathered a ‘tsunami’ of Russian interference to repeatedly choose a European future.

They need the EU to match their faith with speedy steps towards integration.

“Politically we are set to advance, but also technically we have done the homework that would allow us to move to the next phase,” Gherasimov said. “For us, there is a sense of urgency, both because we have this geopolitical opportunity coupled with the openness that we see in Brussels and the political will at home. We want to make it work. Moving to the next phase is of the essence, so that we do not lose time.”

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Cristina Gherasimov, Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration of Moldova and Chief Negotiator with the EU

Leadership needed

Participants broadly agreed that enlargement marries political and geopolitical considerations with the complicated technical process of aligning national norms with EU conditions and standards.

Candidates must remain patient and pragmatic. While the European Commission was praised for maintaining enlargement momentum, EU member states faced criticism for stalling progress and failing to demonstrate the political leadership needed to prepare electorates for the expansion.

Given the current political climate – with nationalist and Eurosceptic parties riding high in many EU countries – leaders must take a proactive role promoting the enlargement as a winning deal both for new members and countries already in the club.

If not, there could be a real danger of candidates facing rejection even after successful membership talks.

“The enlargement process does not finish with concluding the accession negotiations. It finishes with the conclusion of ratification process, and that means you need European politicians to campaign,” said one participant. “What is really important is that the politicians who believe in enlargement, European Union politicians, start preparing their public now.”

Several speakers emphasised the win-win potential of enlargement, both economically and in terms of safeguarding stability, security and democratic values on the continent. Fully uniting Europe as a democratic bloc will also amplify its voice in the world.

“In a world of geopolitical uncertainty, geopolitical shifts and geoeconomic fragmentation [...] we need to look at Europe strategically. We need to look at Europe’s political and economic role, and political influence actually stems from economics,” noted **Irena Radović**, Governor of the Central Bank of Montenegro. “We are losing our competitiveness and our weight in the global circles. I believe that enlargement is a significant part of the solution to the current problems and something that will bring additional value.”

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Andreas Schaal, Director for Global Relations and Co-operation at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and OECD Sherpa to the G7, the G20 and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), pointed to the economic advantages of expanding the EU market into the Balkans.

“It’s amazing to see how vibrant this region is in terms of attracting foreign direct investment. I think it’s 6.4% of GDP (gross domestic product) over the last four years. This is higher than the EU average,” he told a panel on ‘Unlocking investment: driving growth, boosting resilience’. “We need to go back to the question that enlargement makes the EU a stronger institution, a stronger place.”

At a time of deep anxiety over global supply chains, speakers also recalled that the candidate countries hold significant potential as sources of critical raw materials that could bolster European economic and strategic autonomy – or weaken it, should an enlargement flop enable hostile actors to get their claws in the region’s resources.

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Addressing concerns about the impact of enlargement on the EU budget, one speaker argued that absorbing all the Balkan countries would cost the EU’s 450 million citizens roughly the equivalent of a cup of coffee each.

Fit for 37?

Given the impact of previous expansions, which grew the EU from 6 to 27 members between 1973 and 2013, enlargement was hailed as ‘most powerful transformative instrument’ at the Union’s disposal. Still, contributors recalled that past enlargements required internal reforms to adapt the EU to a wider membership – a constraint that further complicates the process.

“Each and every enlargement has been accompanied [...] with a transformation of the European Union. This process of widening and deepening, these two strings of the DNA, this is how the EU operates,” explained **Štefan Füle**, former special envoy to the OSCE and the Western Balkans, former European commissioner for European neighbourhood and enlargement negotiations and Trustee of Friends of Europe.

“We are not talking about the enlargement of one small, tiny country, we’re talking about the enlargement of up to 10 countries. This has huge implications for the way decisions are made, the money is distributed and all of that,” he added. “There isn’t some kind of miracle switch in the European Union: ‘OK, switch to 40. OK, done and here we go’. Absolutely not, and yet the appetite in the European Union to deliver on that deepening, it’s not that big.”

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The Commission faced calls to accelerate plans to prepare the EU internally for the impact of new members joining, notably on issues such as replacing unanimity with more qualified-majority-decision making, sharing out Commission seats and re-jigging the EU budget.

Speakers also highlighted the need for safeguards to ensure countries stick to commitments and values after they join the bloc. “There are also EU member states that suffer from backsliding. Do we have the right responses there? Is the rule of law toolbox sufficient?” asked Heleen Bakker.

Halfway Houses

The EU strategy of gradual integration – bringing candidates into the single market and other EU structures ahead of full membership – was widely applauded. Although speakers cautioned it should not replace enlargement, or serve as a pretext for delaying membership, gradual integration can play a significant role in building ties, trust and familiarity, showing citizens tangible benefits as their country draws closer to the EU.

Elements such as the single payments area, facilitation of cross-border travel and commerce, cheaper data roaming, energy and transport interconnections were all highlighted.

Speakers also urged the EU to do more to encourage and facilitate cross-border links within the Western Balkans, both to bring immediate economic advantages and to prepare them for integration into the wider European market.

Robert de Groot, Vice-President of the European Investment Bank (EIB), welcomed greater determination among Balkan candidates to improve procurement procedures and push ahead with cross-border investments that bind their economies closer. Such steps, he said, are crucial to generate the economies of scale that attract major foreign investment in regional infrastructure.

“The one thing we still have to do is to convince European firms to participate in these tender procedures,” de Groot explained. “Is it worthwhile for the big global construction companies operating from inside Europe to bring all their stuff to one particular place for a small project? That’s why the cross-border projects are so important, because that allows us to come up with bigger numbers, and then it becomes interesting for the Hochtiefs of this world to also put in a bid.” Germany’s Hochtief is one of the world’s largest construction companies.

This year’s expansion of the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA) to include Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania and Moldova was hailed as an example of how gradual integration can deliver visible benefits for the public – making euro payments faster, cheaper, easier and more secure. **Anca Dragu**, Governor of the National Bank of Moldova, described the move as a clear signal that her country is moving closer to full EU membership.

“We have to make sure that the [banking] sector is ready and is at the level of the EU [...]”

I was so proud that we were accepted into SEPA, the Single Euro Payments Area, which is not only a huge step ahead in terms of lower costs, predictability, transferability, faster transactions, but also it is proof that, yes, in terms of legislation and institutions related to AML/CFT (Anti-Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism) and payments, Moldova is aligned to EU standards.”

“We have to make sure that the [banking] sector is ready and is at the level of the EU.”

Anca Dragu, Governor of the National Bank of Moldova



From left to right:

1. **Andreas Schaaf**, Director for OECD Global Relations and Co-operation, and OECD Sherpa to the G7, the G20 and APEC; **Irena Radović**, Governor of the Central Bank of Montenegro
2. **Anca Dragu**, Governor of the National Bank of Moldova; **Robert de Groot**, Vice-President of the European Investment Bank (EIB)
3. **Christian Danielsson**, Swedish State Secretary for EU Affairs; **Andreas Schaaf**, Director for OECD Global Relations and Co-operation, and OECD Sherpa to the G7, the G20 and APEC



Speakers also applauded political efforts to draw candidates closer through alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and participation in the European Political Community. Such initiatives should be further expanded – for example, by bringing Balkan countries into the newly launched European Democracy Shield and EU Strategy for Civil Society.

“At the end of the day, it’s all about values and it can be helped in a broader context [...] the need for participation of the candidate countries in broader values-based initiatives like the democracy shield and the like, which can create the enabling environment to make this better,” said **Jamie Shea**, Senior Fellow for Peace, Security and Defence at Friends of Europe, and former deputy assistant secretary general for emerging security challenges at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

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In the name of the law

The rule of law is central to upholding these values. A panel on ‘Justice reform: delivering meaningful change’, looked at collaboration between Balkan and EU institutions to strengthen transparency, accountability and effective judicial reform. The current political climate has made efforts to guarantee effective application of the rule of law even more important.

“There are two concepts of how justice is delivered: by the rule of law which considers all citizens equal, or players in the market equal; or undemocratic rules where might is right and where there is an arbitrary force that decides who is more equal than the other,” cautioned **Srdan Majstorović**, Chairman of European Policy Centre (CEP), representing Think for Europe, a network of Think Tanks and EU Policy Research Centres in Southeast Europe.

Majstorović explained that pressure on Serbian authorities to reinforce the rule of law comes not only from the EU, but also from civil society protesters who have taken to the streets to demand change. “Not only in Serbia, but in the rest of the region as well, there is a capacity, there is a capacity for change, there is a capacity for our societies to be better, better organised, more democratic, representing the principles and the values upon which the EU itself was formed,” he said.

Another pressing area where judicial cooperation must be enhanced, is the fight against organised crime.

“We already have a single market with the Western Balkans, with some countries in Western Balkans, and I’m sorry to say it, but it is the single market of crime, because the criminals, they don’t have borders, they don’t have them anymore and it’s been a long time that they don’t,” lamented **Ingrid Derveaux**, Secretary General of the

European Judicial Training Network (EJTN). “We must face that reality. We must tackle that challenge altogether.”

She welcomed growing cooperation among judicial authorities to fight cross-border crime, noting such collaboration builds long-term confidence that will pay increasing dividends as Balkan countries move closer to EU membership. “When you share the same challenges and you work together, then you build trust. This is what we need,” Derveaux added.

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Ingrid Derveaux, Secretary General of the European Judicial Training Network (EJTN) (NATO)

Recommendations and conclusion

The 2025 EU-Western Balkans Summit put forward a series of concrete recommendations to advance enlargement, including:

- Push forward gradual integration into the EU single market alongside accession talks, as candidates meet required technical standards.
- Reform EU decision-making to adopt more decisions through qualified majority, reducing reliance on unanimity – particularly for opening clusters in accession talks.
- Allow candidates that align with the Common Foreign and Security Policy to attend EU Foreign Affairs Council meetings in a non-voting capacity.
- Set firm deadlines and benchmarks for the accession negotiations to prevent backsliding by individual member states.
- Invite delegations from candidate countries to participate in European Parliament debates.
- Widen the scope of the European Political Community.
- Organise more visits from EU and member state delegations to candidate countries, including trips outside capitals to engage rural and small-town communities; similarly, invite more delegations of mayors, civil society and influencers from those communities to Brussels.
- Invest more in cross-border infrastructure to strengthen ties among candidate countries and with the EU single market, while easing border controls alongside improvements to physical infrastructure.
- Provide more incentives to encourage emigrants to return to Balkan countries, bringing back skills gained abroad.

- Reform the European Commission in preparation for enlargement, ending the one-commissioner-per-country rule.
- Work to overcome entrenched gender norms in some candidate countries to ensure greater female participation in politics, business, etc.
- Integrate Western Balkan nations in the European Democracy Shield and EU Strategy for Civil Society.
- Open opportunities for more countries in the region to adopt the euro, even before full EU membership.

In conclusion, the Summit made clear that the EU and candidate countries must seize the current opportunity to make enlargement a reality.

Member states need to look beyond local squabbles to unblock membership negotiations, candidates must overcome internal challenges that hinder their bids, and the Commission should complement its efforts to maintain momentum in accession talks with a plan for internal EU reform.

Progress in gradual integration should be accelerated in parallel with formal membership talks. Unity in securing a just and lasting end to the war in Ukraine is essential.

Values must form the bedrock of a successful enlargement, forging a continent that is whole, democratic and free. As **Thomas Waitz**, Chair of the European Parliament Delegation to the EU-Montenegro Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee, put it:

“This region has been the playground of foreign powers for hundreds of years and we should advocate also that these peoples of Europe should take their legitimate place, as we did with Eastern Europe after the breakdown of the Warsaw Pact. This should be the intrinsic motivation. Security is helpful, it brings additional support but, for me, this is not the main driver. The main driver is value based, the main driver is also reminding ourselves about our cultural heritage, common cultural heritage, our history together.”

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1 Ingrid Derveaux

European Judicial Training Network (EJTN)

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2. **Nicole Farnsworth**, Program Director at Kosovo Women's Network
3. **Srđan Majstorović**, Chairman of European Policy Centre (CEP), representing Think for Europe, a network of Think Tanks and EU Policy Research Centres in South East Europe
4. **Thomas Waitz**, Chair of the European Parliament Delegation to the EU-Montenegro Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee





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