



# Key Recommendations of the Thematic Working Group on Security and Geopolitics

#CSFTirana2023

# UNLOCKING PROGRESS

The European Future of the  
Western Balkans



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**About the process**

These recommendations stem from consultations with security experts across all Western Balkan countries within the Thematic Working Group (TWG) on Security and Geopolitics. Discussions focused primarily on how to foster regional security cooperation. The process involved three consultation meetings with 50 regional security experts and other stakeholders, as well as a public conference held in Pristina with 51 attendees. This conference aimed to analyse the primary findings from the consultation process and to establish a set of recommendations for enhancing regional security cooperation. The Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) facilitated the consultation process, alongside a core group of security experts from each of the six Western Balkan countries.

What became evident throughout the discussions was that Russia's brutal invasion in Ukraine has underscored the urgency of Euro-Atlantic integration for the Western Balkan countries. Strengthening and invigorating security cooperation in the Western Balkans plays a significant role in the countries' aspirations to join both the EU and NATO (for those who are not members yet and/or do not wish to join). Three out of the six countries in the region are already NATO members, while four countries are engaged in accession talks with the EU. The alignment of Western Balkans countries with the EU's common foreign and security policy (CFSP) and the common security and defence policy (CSDP) is crucial in the context of security and geopolitical developments, particularly following Russia's brutal invasion in Ukraine.

Numerous internal and external challenges impede regional security cooperation in the Western Balkans. These challenges include organised crime, corruption, lack of meaningful rule of law reforms, malign foreign influences, and unresolved bilateral disputes. These factors contribute to ethno-political radicalization, erode trust, and hinder cooperation among security institutions in the region. These domestic challenges are further complicated by internal dynamics in the European Union (EU), including the rise of far-right populism, as well as socio-economic challenges, such as high-inflation, political and economic ramifications of Russian invasion of Ukraine, consequences of Covid-19 pandemic, etc. This not only casts uncertainty over the Western Balkans' future EU accession perspective but also poses challenges to the broader EU project itself.

Cooperation or investment in infrastructure development projects has become a prime source of potential foreign malign influence in the Western Balkans, such as the case in **Montenegro, Serbia as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina**. This results in detrimental consequences, potentially affecting the EU connectivity agenda. Many of these projects have been marred by corruption scandals or a disregard for EU rules and standards. This can be attributed to the accessibility of funds, particularly in the case of Chinese loans.

Disinformation campaigns and propaganda, distorting public discourse and shaping narratives are another prevalent source of malign foreign influence. Counteracting this necessitates media empowerment, strengthening democratic resilience, and bolstering the capacities of media organisations to counter disinformation efforts. But also, media organisations should achieve greater transparency in ownership structures, respectively openly sharing information about who the true owners of media organizations are. This will further strengthen media credibility and integrity.

**Organized crime and corruption**, represents a significant holistic threat for the Western Balkans. This constitutes a transnational menace that necessitates cross-border collaboration and a comprehensive and coordinated response. In line with the **Declaration on Strengthening Cooperation in Countering Transnational Organized Crime**, adopted during the OSCE Ministerial Council meeting in Tirana in December 2020, as well as other pertinent commitments, we strongly urge governments to facilitate cooperation among all relevant stakeholders, including public institutions and civil society organizations.

Achieving reconciliation within and between societies in the Western Balkans stands as a central goal of the Berlin Process, as defined in the 2014 Declaration of the German Chair. A pivotal achievement in this process has been the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) in 2016. The recognition of reconciliation's significance for the region's EU integration took place during the informal meeting of WB6 Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Sarajevo on 16 March 2018.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have the potential to enhance regional security cooperation in the Western Balkans, even if it is important to recognise that they are not a panacea for the complex challenges facing the region, as outlined above. Resolving the persisting problems/-conundrums in the countries of the region requires perseverance, committed political will and leadership.

**To the governments of the Western Balkan countries:**

**1. Political leaders from the Western Balkan countries should commit to altering their tone and language when communicating with each other and in general when referring to other countries and citizens in the Western Balkans, as well as to minorities and other ethnic groups in their own country.** Accordingly, a shift in the political discourse in the Western Balkans should prioritise reconciliation, empathy, and cooperation. The use of inflammatory language by the region's leaders is a fundamental factor perpetuating political extremism and ethno-political radicalization in the Western Balkans.

**2. During 2024, the national authorities in the Western Balkans should focus on establishing a screening mechanism for Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), or at least agree on regionally accepted standards for screening of investments.** This is important to foster resilience against corrosive capital, linked to corruption vulnerabilities linked to domestic and foreign investments. Development of regional guidance criteria and procedures for screening mechanisms at the economy level for quick reaction to FDI concerns based on the emerging EU standards, is already part of EU's commitment to supporting Common Regional Market (CRM), which was agreed by all Western Balkan countries at the Sofia Summit in 2020. Also, it is important for the Western Balkans governments to extend their analysis to investments linked to politically exposed individuals and organized crime networks.

**3. The Western Balkans governments must prioritize alignment with the EU's Regulation 2019/452 and report on the progress at the next Berlin Process Summit.** Western Balkans governments should exchange information as well as cooperate with each other and the European Commission for screening FDIs or investments in general. In this context, the issue of beneficial ownership, as already noted in this study by IRI's Western Balkans on Threats to Democracy, is of a particular relevance. We urge all countries in the region to establish beneficial ownership registries and to improve the ability of countries to cross-reference this information.

**4. During 2024, the Berlin Process - Security Commitments Steering Group should publish its annual assessment of progress on implementation of the commitments of the Western Balkan governments to cooperate on security threats facing the region.** At

the Western Balkans Summit of the Berlin Process, held in London in July 2018, the governments of the Western Balkans committed themselves to strengthening connectivity and co-operation within the region in the fields of serious and organised crime, terrorism, cybersecurity, and other threats. Furthermore, they agreed to a Joint Declaration on strengthening information exchange between law enforcement agencies; to a Call to Action to end forced labour, modern slavery, and human trafficking; and to a Small Arms and Light Weapons Initiative Road Map (SALW). The six governments of the Western Balkans also agreed to establish a Berlin Process - Security Commitments Steering Group to monitor the delivery of these commitments. One of the roles of this Steering Group is to “Compil[e] a joint annual assessment of progress made ahead of subsequent Berlin Process summits”. Such an assessment progress report should be made public and encourage discussion.

**5. Given evolving geopolitical situations, including events in Afghanistan, Russian invasion in Ukraine, as well as recent mass shootings in the Western Balkans, the countries in the region should revise national arms control legislation to harmonize with the EU legal framework becomes crucial for bolstering regional security.** The harmonization with the EU norms **should be completed by 2026**, curtailing illicit movement of SALW and ammunition. Despite the "Sustainable solution to illegal Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in the Western Balkans by 2024: Roadmap," comprehensive mechanisms are not yet in place. In May 2023, the European Commission hosted a high-level meeting in Brussels to discuss the implementation of the Western Balkans SALW Control Roadmap, and HR/VP Josep Borrell stated that “there is not going to be a safe European Union without a stable, strong and peaceful Western Balkans”. The review of SALW is planned for 2024, and the Council of the EU decided in 2022 to allocate additional €4 million euros to its implementation.

**6. During 2024 all countries of the Western Balkans should conclude cooperation agreements with the European Public Prosecutor's Office.** This would contribute to the strengthening of the rule of law in the Western Balkans as well as strengthen democratic resilience. A strong rule of law is essential for preventing and mitigating malign foreign influence, organised corruption and crime, as well as promoting peace and security in the Western Balkans.

**To the partner countries of the Berlin Process and the European Union (EU):**

**1. The European Union (EU) should establish a financial facility solely dedicated to supporting reconciliation projects in the Western Balkans.** For the new legislative term, the European Commission/DG-NEAR should put forward a proposal for the establishment of such a programme, under IPA, Global Europe, or another adequate instrument. Despite some progress, prioritizing reconciliation efforts in the Western Balkans is urgent. Competing narratives within Western Balkan societies, notably in Kosovo, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, regarding the brutal wars of the 1990s, continue to hinder progress in reconciliation, as recent events have reminded everyone. Conflictual relations at governmental level feed political disputes among regional leaders that also trickles down to the communities, impeding reconciliation. This new facility should lead to the implementation of a reconciliation roadmap, with specific milestones targeted for completion by 2030. Drawing inspiration from the PEACE Programme in Northern Ireland, established by the European Commission on 7 December 1994, the objective of the programme should be to increase people-to-people contacts among Western Balkan societies and counter narratives that promote hate-speech.

**2. During 2024, the European Commission should draft propose concrete measures on the integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU's Digital Single Market and cybersecurity framework, as expressed by President of the European Commission von der Leyen.** In this context, a detailed action plan should be presented to achieve this goal at the 2025 Berlin Process summit, respectively **for integration of the Western Balkans in the work of the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA)**, as well as **in the EU Cybersecurity Incident Review Mechanism.**

**3. During 2024, the European Commission invite WB6 to join the EU Rule of Law Report Mechanism as well as the EU Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation.** In the 2023 State of the Union address, European Commission President von der Leyen suggested that accession countries should also be included in the Rule of Law Report Mechanism. This would allow WB6, akin to the current 27 EU Member States, to undergo assessments based on the same set of benchmarks across four critical areas related to the rule of law: the justice system, anti-corruption measures, media pluralism and freedom, and other institutional aspects linked to checks and balances. Additionally, this expansion would strengthen dialogue between the European Commission, national parliaments and governments, civil society, and other stakeholders in the Western Balkans, with a specific focus on rule of law. It would promote rule of law and empower civil society in the Western Balkans that often lack structured and constructive engagement with the national institutions on rule of law matters.

**4. At the next Berlin Process Summit, leaders should discuss an assessment report of the implementation of the anti-corruption pledges agreed by WB6 at the 2018 London Summit, and revise pledges (if necessary) in order to better address new risks, as well as emerging vulnerabilities towards corruption in the region related to large-scale infrastructure projects. Discussions should build on existing civil society monitoring and evaluation reports.**

**To the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC):**

**1. The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) should assess regional security cooperation initiatives in the Western Balkans and propose concrete recommendations/options for rationalization and inclusiveness of initiatives at the next Berlin Process Summit.** The rationalization process should be based on the principle of having fewer, but more effective, empowered, and inclusive mechanisms. The fact that Kosovo is not a party to most regional cooperation initiatives is a detriment to regional security cooperation.

**To civil society organisations:**

**1. Civil society organisations in the Western Balkans must increase their activities to monitor the implementation by the Western Balkan governments of the commitments agreed upon in the framework of the Berlin Process.** Considering the growing significance of building cyber-resilience for the Western Balkans, civil society organisations should produce an annual monitoring report of adherence of the Western Balkans with the Berlin Declaration on Digital Society and Value-based Digital Government.

**2. Investing in media is important to strengthen democratic resilience, and in this context developing capacities of the media organization to counter disinformation efforts by malign state and non-state actors is essential.** Malign foreign influence often relies on disinformation campaigns and propaganda to distort public discourse and shape narratives. By spreading fake news and propaganda, these actors aim to manipulate public perception and expand security and governance vulnerabilities in the WB6. Media freedom, an essential pillar of democracy, has faced a distressing decline in certain countries in the Western Balkans due to mounting government pressure. The increased vulnerability of media to succumb to external influences is a direct consequence of such pressures. It is crucial to highlight this concern as an integral component of the democracy criteria for EU accession.

**3. Civil society organisations should increase deepen their research into ethno-political radicalization and far-right activities in the Western Balkans.** Political extremism and ethno-political radicalization are increasing in the Western Balkans, as the cases of Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina shows,



with the region being exploited as a platform for far-right mobilisation within the EU, often coordinated with Russian state and non-state actors: “There is no doubt that the Russian regime and Wagner in particular interact regularly with various Balkan radicals.” Closer monitoring and in-depth research are required to comprehend and address these phenomena. Increased financial support from the EU and regional governments for such initiatives, especially bottom-up reconciliation efforts, is significant.