



# **Shaping Peace and Security in the Western Balkans**

## **Civil Society Perspectives on EU Accession**

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**Meeting Report**  
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## European Peacebuilding Liaison Office

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The Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) is a mechanism for dialogue between civil society and EU policymakers on issues related to peace and conflict. It is co-financed by the European Union (Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe). It is managed by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), a civil society network, in cooperation with the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The fifth phase of the CSDN will last from 2023 to 2026. For more information, please visit the EPLO website.



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# Shaping Peace and Security in the Western Balkans

## Civil Society Perspectives on EU Accession

### ■ Executive summary

This report summarises discussions from the Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) geographic meeting on *Shaping Peace and Security in the Western Balkans: Civil Society Perspectives on EU Accession*, held in Prishtina on 26 November. The meeting brought together civil society representatives from the six countries of the Western Balkans and EU stakeholders to reflect on evolving peace and security dynamics in the Western Balkans and to consider the role of EU accession within this context. As the meeting did not aim to reach a consensus, the issues highlighted in this report do not necessarily represent a majority view of participants.

Discussions revealed a range of perspectives on the region's security challenges. Many participants emphasised that **insecurity in the Western Balkans is driven by structural weaknesses** including unresolved political disputes, weak rule of law, democratic backsliding, and declining trust in institutions. These vulnerabilities intersect with disinformation, hybrid threats, and malign external influence, particularly in the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Several interventions addressed the ambition for the **Western Balkans to become a credible security partner for the EU**. Participants stressed that this shift cannot be achieved through security cooperation alone but must be embedded in a broader package that includes accountability, rule of law reforms, meaningful conflict resolution, and a whole-of-society approach. Concerns were raised that a **narrow focus on hard security risks reinforcing stabilitarian governance models and sidelining democratic reform**.

Discussions repeatedly returned to the EU's dual role as a peacebuilding and political actor, with some participants warning that reduced EU engagement in mediation and conflict prevention could open space for other actors, including Russia, to exert greater influence. In this context, the credibility of the enlargement process was widely discussed, with several contributors arguing that **the erosion of accession prospects can itself constitute a security risk** in the region. Participants highlighted the need for clearer communication, and **engagement beyond state actors** on the benefits of EU accession.

**Civil society participation emerged as both a point of concern and an area of opportunity.** While there was broad agreement that civil society should be a partner in the enlargement process, participants highlighted significant incoherence across the region in how this participation is structured, resourced, and sustained. Examples such as the Serbian National Convention on the European Union illustrated the potential of institutionalised models, while others warned **that reduced or discontinued engagement with civil society, including after accession, risks contributing to democratic erosion, growing autocracy, and deeper societal divisions.**

Overall, the discussions underscored that **EU enlargement remains a potentially powerful framework for peace and security in the Western Balkans**, but only if pursued in a **conflict-sensitive, credible, and inclusive manner**. Participants emphasised that it is not too late for the EU to reassert its role, but doing so will require renewed political commitment, consistent engagement with civil society, and a recognition that missed opportunities in the enlargement process carry long-term risks for both democracy and security in the region.

## Peace and security challenges in the Western Balkans

Session 1 examined the most pressing peace and security challenges facing the Western Balkans in the context of shifting European and global security dynamics. Participants agreed that the region does not face isolated or episodic crises but rather suffers from **systemic fragility rooted in weak rule of law, politicised institutions, democratic backsliding, unresolved conflicts, and declining trust in both domestic and European institutions**. These internal vulnerabilities were widely identified as the region's primary security challenges, which are in turn amplified by disinformation, hybrid threats, ethnopolitical tensions, and malign external influence.

The discussion took place against the backdrop of the EU's evolving security posture following the outbreak Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. As the EU increasingly prioritises defence readiness, rearmament, and hard security, participants questioned whether the Western Balkans and the EU perceive threats in the same way. While EU institutions do not generally view the Western Balkans as a direct security threat, the region is increasingly seen as a source of instability whose **unresolved disputes and governance weaknesses could be exploited to divert European attention and resources from other strategic fronts**.

Several speakers **cautioned against an overly securitised approach to the region.**

There was strong concern that the EU's growing emphasis on hard security risks **reinforcing stabilitocracies<sup>1</sup> by prioritising the defence of borders over democratic accountability and institutional reform.** Participants stressed that security without democracy is unsustainable, and that neglecting democratic governance undermines long-term societal resilience, which is itself the foundation of security.

Unresolved political disputes in the region were repeatedly identified as core drivers of insecurity. Political tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo-Serbia relations, and Bosnian Serb-Kosovo tensions were described by one participant as the three “neuralgic points” that shape regional instability and constrain democratic development. It was argued that without decisive progress on these issues, the Western Balkans will continue to export instability rather than become a credible contributor to European security. There was a call for a renewed and **more assertive EU-led political push to resolve the region's core disputes.** This included proposals for a “Dayton II”-type framework for Bosnia and Herzegovina, reflecting the view that thirty years after the original Dayton Agreement, its structural shortcomings require a comprehensive political settlement. Participants also stressed the need for a **legally binding and functional normalisation agreement between Kosovo and Serbia**, not necessarily centred on full mutual recognition, but on establishing stable, institutionalised relations capable of reducing tensions and enabling democratic progress and enhanced security.

The role of external actors featured prominently in the discussion. Russia was widely identified as exploiting regional divisions through disinformation, ethnonationalist divides, and hybrid tactics in order to weaken European cohesion. At the same time, participants noted that the United States continues to be perceived as a more decisive security actor in moments of crisis, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, raising questions about the **EU's credibility and capacity to act with unity and resolve.** However, the region's **reliance on external intervention** was also seen as **reducing accountability among domestic political elites**, who often expect international actors to manage crises in place of meaningful reform and engagement across divides.

Participants highlighted concrete opportunities for enhanced EU-Western Balkans cooperation on peace and security that carry low political cost but high potential impact. These included fostering **deeper engagement between the region and EU security and defence structures** such as the European Defence Agency, granting **observer status for Western Balkan countries in the EU Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA)**, and the **inclusion of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo in the EU's annual Rule of Law report.**

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<sup>1</sup> Regimes with substantial democratic shortcomings that nonetheless derive external legitimacy from their purported stabilising role.

Civil society actors stressed that gradual accession must be made tangible and comprehensible to citizens, rather than remaining abstract or rhetorical.

Civil society was consistently identified as a key actor in countering disinformation, fostering inclusive dialogue, and strengthening trust across communities. Examples were shared of how **visible and coordinated EU support for civil society**, particularly in the fight against disinformation, can have immediate and meaningful impact.

## EU support to civil society

During the 2024 election period in North Macedonia, in what was a polarised information environment shaped by persistent disinformation, **civil society organisations and journalists involved in fact checking became the target of a coordinated smear campaign**. Fact checking efforts were falsely portrayed as censorship, and the campaign escalated into intimidation and threats against journalists and civil society actors during the electoral process.

While domestic institutions failed to respond effectively, the EU Delegation and several EU Member State embassies acted collectively by **publicly engaging with civil society actors, signalling clear political support for fact checking**, condemning attacks on journalists, and echoing civil society's call for authorities to uphold media freedom and the rule of law. This **visible and unified political signalling** contributed to the rapid de-escalation of the smear campaign, demonstrating how timely and public support from the EU and its Member States can strengthen resilience against disinformation and protect democratic processes at critical moments.

In conclusion, the session underscored that the Western Balkans' security challenges are primarily internal, but with significant regional and European consequences. EU accession remains a central tool for addressing these challenges, but only if accompanied by renewed political commitment, consistent use of democracy support and peacebuilding instruments, and genuine partnership with civil society. Participants warned that **further erosion of EU credibility would not only undermine reform prospects in the region but could itself become a long-term security risk for Europe as a whole**.

## EU accession and its implications for peace and security

Session 2 examined in greater detail how the EU accession process affects peace, security, and democratic resilience in the Western Balkans. The discussion highlighted

widening differences across the region. While Albania and Montenegro currently show renewed momentum and optimism around EU integration, North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, are experiencing **accession fatigue, declining trust in the process, and growing scepticism**, particularly among young people.

Participants stressed that EU accession can contribute to conflict mitigation and regional cooperation only when the process is credible, transparent, and inclusive. When **accession stalls or appears politically instrumentalised**, it risks **reinforcing nationalist narratives, weakening democratic reforms, and undermining reconciliation efforts**. In this context, reduced cross-community interaction, social media echo chambers, and unresolved legacies of the conflicts of the 1990s were identified as compounding factors that heighten polarisation and increase the risk of radicalisation when confidence in the accession process erodes. North Macedonia's experience, following significant concessions without tangible progress, was repeatedly referenced as a cautionary tale that has contributed to democratic regression and opened space for malign external influence, including Russian narratives.

## From active mediator to perceived detachment

While the EU was once seen as an active and engaged political actor in the Western Balkans, this perception has gradually given way to growing scepticism amid declining trust in the accession process. In North Macedonia, for example, the EU played a direct role in addressing political and interethnic crises, notably during the 2001 conflict and the 2015 political crisis, when, alongside the United States, it **actively mediated between political actors and helped stabilise the country**, enabling credible parliamentary elections in 2016.

In contrast, the EU is now perceived as far less willing to intervene using these same tools, despite their demonstrated effectiveness. The current reluctance to deploy similar tools marks a significant shift, **reinforcing perceptions that the EU's commitment to engagement and enlargement has weakened**, despite the continued availability of effective EU tools for conflict prevention and democracy support.

A key concern for the Western Balkans was the risk of “box-ticking” accession, where **formal compliance with the *acquis* does not translate into a lasting commitment to transitional justice, reconciliation, or the rule of law once membership** is achieved. Croatia was cited as an example of how accountability for war crimes and dealing with the past were deprioritised after accession, with negative consequences for regional reconciliation and education reform processes.

The session also **assessed gradual accession as both an opportunity and a risk**. Partial inclusion in EU policies, markets, and security frameworks can generate tangible benefits and strengthen cooperation, but the **absence of clear communication from the EU**

**about what gradual accession entails has created confusion and mistrust.** Participants warned that uneven or poorly defined forms of gradual accession risk reinforcing asymmetrical relationships between the EU and the Western Balkans. Rather than supporting convergence and equal partnership, such arrangements could accelerate youth emigration, deepen labour market imbalances, and position some countries primarily as service providers for EU security priorities. Examples cited included the agreement between Denmark and Kosovo on the transfer and housing of third-country prisoners, as well as the establishment of a migrant return and processing hub in Albania under an agreement with Italy. Participants cautioned that, in the absence of clear political inclusion, accountability, and tangible benefits for local societies, **such arrangements risk framing parts of the region as external buffers for EU migration and security management**, thereby undermining public support for integration and long-term stability.

**Civil society was identified as central to sustaining reforms and strengthening peace.** The Serbian National Convention on the EU was highlighted as a strong example of structured civil society engagement in accession negotiations, providing technical expertise and fostering accountability. However, participants noted that such models remain exceptional. Across much of the region, limited access to negotiations, high technical barriers, shrinking civic space, and inadequate funding continue to constrain meaningful civil society participation, especially that of young people.

## Best practice for civil society engagement in accession

Established as an independent platform modelled on the Slovak experience, the Serbian National Convention on the European Union (NCEU) brings together a broad network of more than 700 civil society organisations, academic institutions, media, trade unions, and professional associations. The NCEU preserves independence and transparency, allowing civil society to scrutinise the accession process publicly while contributing substantively to the negotiations. A key feature of the Serbian model is its formalised role, established through a parliamentary decision that has, since 2014, made **consultation with the NCEU a mandatory step in the adoption of negotiating positions within the Serbian Parliament's Committee for EU Integration**. NCEU has established thematic and chapter-specific working groups that monitor negotiations, draft shadow reports, and issue public recommendations. This model demonstrates **how institutionalised, independent civil society engagement can strengthen accountability, expertise, and public trust in the accession process**.

Discussions on youth perspectives on EU accession revealed continued support for EU accession, alongside a growing sense of disillusionment. This scepticism was described as being driven less by opposition to Europe itself and more by **distrust in domestic**

**political elites and concerns that accession benefits will be captured by entrenched power structures.**

In conclusion, participants agreed that **EU enlargement remains a powerful tool to bring about peace and security in the Western Balkans**, but only if pursued with conflict sensitivity, consistent political commitment, and a whole-of-society approach. Renewed engagement with civil society, clearer communication on accession pathways, and parallel efforts on reconciliation and accountability were identified as essential to preventing further democratic backsliding, social fragmentation, and geopolitical vulnerability in the region.