

BOOSTING COOPERATION IN THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS: EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE AS A MODEL FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

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***Abstract.** This article investigates how East Central Europe's (ECE) successful—though uneven—experience of European Union enlargement can help reinvigorate the Western Balkans' stalled accession process. Through a comparative review of more than two dozen academic and policy studies, it distils four interlinked lessons. First, credible and phased EU conditionality must be coupled with early "integration dividends" that keep domestic publics and reform coalitions motivated. Second, the rule of law agenda should tackle state capture up front, empowering watchdog institutions and civil society before the EU's leverage wanes. Third, regional cooperation—modelled on the Visegrád Group and now advanced through CEFTA, the Common Regional Market and the Berlin Process—acts both as rehearsal for, and condition of, EU membership. Finally, reconciliation and transitional justice initiatives are indispensable to durable stability and should be treated as core accession benchmarks. The article concludes that a coordinated regional approach, backed by a consistent EU commitment, remains the most viable path to completing Europe's unification and delivering lasting prosperity to the Western Balkans.*

***Keywords:** European integration, Western Balkans, EU enlargement, Regional cooperation, EU conditionality*

1. INTRODUCTION

The prospect of EU membership has long been seen as the Western Balkans' path to peace and prosperity, especially since the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit declared the region's future to lie in the EU. In contrast to the stalled accession of the Western Balkans, the 2004–2007 enlargement in East-Central Europe (ECE) demonstrated the transformative power of EU integration, cementing democracy and fostering regional cooperation. The Visegrád Group exemplified how coordinated efforts could accelerate accession and sustain momentum. However, the ECE experience also revealed an enduring East–West divide in governance and economic development, offering both achievements and warnings.

Today, nearly two decades after Thessaloniki, only Croatia has joined the EU, while the rest of the region faces prolonged candidacies, weakening trust in the EU and fueling reform fatigue. Although public support for accession remains high, frustration with the slow pace has grown. Meanwhile, internal EU challenges—financial crises, Brexit, and enlargement fatigue—have eroded the Union's appetite for expansion, undermining its transformative leverage.

This paper explores how ECE's experience can inform Western Balkan integration. It asks which policies, reforms, and regional initiatives might be adapted, and

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what pitfalls must be avoided. Drawing on several studies, it distills lessons across several domains: EU conditionality, governance reforms, regional cooperation, and reconciliation. Ultimately, the paper argues that a coordinated regional approach, combined with sustained EU commitment, can help unlock the region's stalled accession and ensure a smoother path toward full European integration.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: EUROPEANIZATION, CONDITIONALITY AND REGIONAL COOPERATION

2.1. EU Enlargement as Transformation

The expansion of the EU into post-communist Europe has been studied as a powerful driver of political, economic, and legal transformation – a process often termed “*Europeanization*” (Economides & Ker-Lindsay, 2019:3). In the cases of Central and Eastern Europe, EU accession provided a *credible incentive framework* that guided reforms and helped consolidate democracy. The *Eastern enlargement of 2004–2007* is widely seen as a success in anchoring previously authoritarian states to European norms. However, with the benefit of 20 years of hindsight, scholars have also identified shortcomings. Volintiru *et al.* (2024) note that an East–West gap in the EU remains “*highly salient,*” pointing to *economic inequalities and democratic backsliding* in some new member states (Misik & Brusis, 2025:4). Earlier scholarship emphasized income convergence – and indeed the EU's cohesion funds and internal market access enabled strong growth in many ECE countries in the 2000s. But subsequent research highlights that *political divergence* has emerged as well: challenges such as populism and illiberal governance have surfaced in Hungary, Poland, and others. This has led to critical reflections on the enlargement process. One strand of literature argues that the EU was “*not thorough or consistent enough*” in enforcing democratic criteria before admitting CEE states, thereby allowing resilient illiberal tendencies to later flourish. The lesson drawn is that *front-loading and rigorously monitoring key reforms (judicial independence, anti-corruption, minority rights)* is vital – a lesson directly relevant to the Western Balkans, where these issues are even more acute (Nechev, 2022:2).

2.2. EU Conditionality and Compliance

The principal tool the EU wields in candidate countries is *conditionality* – the requirement to adopt EU laws and meet governance standards as a condition for progress in accession. Studies on pre-accession in the Western Balkans underscore both the promise and limits of conditionality. On one hand, “*pre-accession Europeanization*” has brought tangible changes: for example, in Serbia and Kosovo the EU's influence (through instruments like the Stabilisation and Association Agreements and missions such as EULEX) has prompted legal and administrative reforms. On the other hand, authors like Richter and Wunsch (2020:41) argue that in a context of *state capture*, EU conditionality alone has “*limited impact*” – and can even *entrench corrupt networks* by empowering incumbent elites. Their analysis of the Western Balkans suggests three problematic linkages between EU conditionality and governance: (1) external pressure for simultaneous political and economic reforms opened avenues for business oligarchs to create clientelistic networks (e.g. rapid privatizations benefitting insiders); (2) the top-down nature of EU-driven reforms sometimes *weakened domestic accountability*, sidelining local civil society and opposition voices; and (3) as long as leaders deliver formal compliance, the EU often *deals with* (and inadvertently legitimizes) those very leaders, even if they manipulate institutions or curb media freedom. Empirical evidence

from Serbia's EU trajectory supports these claims – despite meeting many EU technical benchmarks, Serbia has experienced *democratic backsliding* and concentration of power, suggesting that “*formal progress towards membership and high-level interactions with EU officials legitimize corrupt elites*” in the absence of deeper societal change. This line of critique – often encapsulated in the term “*stabilitocracy*” – holds that the EU has been too lenient with Balkan strongmen as long as they ensure regional stability, thereby undermining the transformative agenda. In response, the EU has tried to recalibrate its approach: the 2018 EU *Western Balkans Strategy* and the revised 2020 accession methodology put a much stronger emphasis on the *rule of law, judicial reform, and anti-corruption* as foundational chapters that can halt overall negotiations if progress stalls. Hoxhaj documents how the EU's new enlargement package explicitly made the fight against organized crime and corruption “*cornerstones*” of the process, learning from the lesson that *post-accession backsliding* in CEE (e.g. Poland's and Hungary's constitutional troubles) must not be repeated in the Balkans (Hoxhaj, 2021:143). Nevertheless, Hoxhaj cautions that without genuine local political will – still lacking in what they describe as “*semi-autocratic systems*” – even strengthened conditionality may struggle to produce lasting change. This suggests that EU leverage has to be paired with bottom-up demand for reform, a theme we will revisit when examining *captured states* and *captured societies*.

2.3. State Capacity, Absorption, and State Capture

A recurrent theme in the literature is the *administrative and absorption capacity* of candidate countries – essentially, their ability to implement and “*absorb*” the acquis (the EU's legal norms) and to effectively use EU funds and opportunities. East-Central Europe faced enormous capacity-building challenges during the 1990s and early 2000s, from overhauling communist-era administrations to training judges in EU law. With extensive EU technical assistance (PHARE, twinning programs) and political will from domestic reformers, most ECE countries managed to sufficiently strengthen their institutions by 2004. The Western Balkans inherited an arguably even more difficult starting point – weaker states emerging from socialist Yugoslavia or autarkic Albania, many also *damaged by war*. Two recent studies in *Regional Science Policy & Practice* (Qorraj *et al.*, 2024:5; Qorraj *et al.*, 2025:7) analyze *absorption capacity on both sides*: the capacity of the EU to integrate new members, and the capacity of Western Balkan states to meet membership obligations. They conclude that the *delay in WB enlargement is due to a double-sided capacity gap* – on the EU side, institutional fatigue and internal crises (Brexit, financial instability) have limited the Union's “*absorption capacity*” to take in new members; on the WB side, “*limited absorption capacity is reflected by a failure to fulfill EU standards and difficulties in benefiting from EU assistance due to weak institutions and lack of political will*”. In other words, reforms on paper often outpace actual implementation in the Balkans, and even available EU funds (e.g. IPA pre-accession aid) sometimes go underutilized or have limited impact due to administrative bottlenecks. This aligns with findings by Kmezić (2020:1) that “*the transformative power of the EU is too weak to positively impact democratic and economic setbacks*” under current conditions – institutions may tick the boxes for Brussels, yet governance quality stagnates.

A particularly pernicious aspect of weak state capacity is *state capture* – where public institutions are hijacked by private interests and networks (often political-party based) for corrupt gain. The Western Balkans literature is replete with analyses of state

capture, describing environments in which ruling elites manipulate levers of power (judiciary, media regulation, public procurement) to entrench themselves. This problem is not entirely foreign to East-Central Europe (e.g. oligarchic influence in Bulgaria or Slovakia's judiciary scandals), but it is more systemic in parts of the Balkans. As noted, EU conditionality can unintentionally abet state capture if it bolsters incumbent legitimacy without breaking patronage chains. Some authors have introduced the concept of "*captured societies*", extending the idea of state capture to the societal level. In a captured society, informal patron-client ties and party loyalties pervade not just state institutions but also civil society organizations, media, and the private sector. *Cvetičanin et al. (2023:42)* argue that the Western Balkans exhibit elements of societal capture, whereby even NGOs or independent media may be co-opted into political networks, making bottom-up pressure for reform weak. This underscores a lesson from Central Europe: while EU integration requires adopting formal rules, it also crucially needs *norm internalization and genuine pluralism*. In Poland and Hungary, the erosion of checks and balances after accession revealed that formal compliance during candidacy did not guarantee deep-rooted liberal democracy. For the Balkans, then, studies urge a focus on *empowering independent institutions and civil society before accession* – to avoid importing unresolved governance pathologies into the EU.

2.4. Policy Transfer in Specific Sectors

Several works examine how particular policy domains from the CEE accession "*toolbox*" have been transferred (or not) to the Western Balkans. For instance, *minority rights protection* was a significant accession criterion for CEE countries, influenced by ethnic conflicts in the 1990s. Sasse (2012:17) observes that EU conditionality in Central Europe led to improved minority-language rights and anti-discrimination laws, benefiting groups like Hungarian minorities in Slovakia and Romania. These became part of the "*Copenhagen political criteria*" and were largely sustained after accession, giving minorities greater confidence under a supranational legal umbrella. In the Western Balkans, minority rights and inter-ethnic reconciliation are even more central (given the legacy of Bosnia's war, Kosovo's status, etc.). The EU has insisted on power-sharing and minority protections in peace agreements (e.g. the Ohrid Framework in North Macedonia, the Ahtisaari Plan in Kosovo). However, research notes uneven implementation – e.g. segregation in schooling persists in Bosnia, and Roma communities across the Balkans remain marginalized. Lessons from CEE suggest that *legal frameworks* (minority language use, representation quotas, cultural rights) can be transplanted, but *trust-building* takes longer. Cross-border cooperation programs have been one tool: by linking minority communities across new EU external borders (for example, Hungarian communities in Vojvodina, Serbia, with those in Hungary proper), European integration reframes ethnic ties as a bridge rather than a threat. Such initiatives, supported by EU funding, echo similar ones in CEE (e.g. Polish-German and Hungarian-Slovak reconciliation projects) and are seen as confidence-building measures that the Western Balkans should deepen.

Another sector is *environmental governance*. EU accession demands extensive alignment with environmental directives – a notorious challenge due to costly infrastructure (water treatment, waste management) and the need for new regulatory institutions. *Reforming Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) systems: Lessons from CEE* (Dusik & Sadler, 2012:8) found that Central European countries initially struggled to implement the EU's SEA Directive, often treating it as a box-ticking exercise

with weak public consultation. Over time, however, compliance improved as capacities grew and EU oversight continued post-accession. For the Western Balkans, these lessons have led to earlier intervention: EU projects have trained Balkan officials in environmental impact assessment and provided investment for infrastructure upgrades. Nonetheless, as Berisha and Cotella (2024:12) show in the realm of *spatial planning*, Europeanization in candidate countries is not automatic. They document how “*despite pervasive European influences, the evolution of spatial planning in the Western Balkans remains tethered to historical paths,*” with local planning cultures sometimes resisting participatory practices encouraged by the EU. Weak enforcement and low public awareness meant that EU spatial planning principles (integrated regional plans, stakeholder engagement) often became “*rather discursive policy interventions*” – adopted in strategy documents but not in day-to-day decision-making. This reflects a broader point in the literature: *policy transfer requires domestic ownership*. Where CEE countries treated EU norms as purely external impositions, reforms tended to be superficial; where domestic coalitions embraced them (e.g. Baltic states on environmental protection, or Slovenia on minority rights), changes were more durable. Western Balkan states thus need to cultivate internal champions for reforms – learning not just the letter of the *acquis* but the spirit, through twinning with CEE counterparts, study visits, and civil society networks spanning East and West.

2.5. Regional Cooperation as an Accession Driver

A distinct body of work focuses on *regional cooperation mechanisms*, positing that countries that work together regionally are better prepared for EU membership. Petričušić (2005:15) famously argued that “*the necessity of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans is [paramount],*” and that the EU’s insistence on such cooperation should be seen as an opportunity, not a threat. Unlike the Central Europeans, who each largely followed their own timetable (with the Visegrád states synchronizing to some extent, but still evaluated individually by the EU), the Western Balkans were from the start grouped under the *Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP)*. The SAP explicitly linked progress to regional stability and good-neighborly relations: for instance, *Article 5* of the EU’s 1999 SAP framework stressed that each country’s advance would also consider its cooperation with neighbors (e.g. on refugee returns, border disputes, trade). Petričušić noted that despite an official policy of “*own merits*” (each applicant judged on its achievements), in practice the Western Balkans have been treated with a “*more regional approach*” than Central Europe. The unresolved status of Kosovo, or the inter-ethnic governance in Bosnia, are not just bilateral issues but regional ones affecting the EU path of multiple states. Therefore, the EU has promoted initiatives like the *Stability Pact (1999)*, succeeded by the *Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)*, and the *Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA-2006)* among Western Balkan economies, as preparatory steps for EU entry. The logic is simple: *cooperation begets stability, and stability begets faster integration*. Empirical evidence backs this: Western Balkan countries with higher levels of regional trade and diplomatic engagement tended to progress more in EU negotiations than those mired in disputes.

Recent analyses by Baliqi (2021:23) and Kmezić (2020:1) take this further, arguing that “*there is no European integration without regional cooperation; in turn, there is no regional cooperation without dealing with the past.*” Here, *transitional justice and reconciliation* are brought into the equation. Baliqi points out that the slow pace of EU accession has contributed to a “*loss of trust in state institutions, reinforced*

nationalistic sentiments, and increased youth emigration” in the Balkans. To break this cycle, the countries themselves must collaborate on addressing the legacies of conflict – e.g. jointly supporting war crimes prosecutions, truth commissions, missing persons searches – which can build mutual trust and strengthen their case for EU membership. The EU’s role, he contends, should be to act “unitedly and more determined” in resolving bilateral disputes like Serbia–Kosovo relations, and to *prioritize support for regional transitional justice initiatives* as part of the integration strategy. This view aligns with the EU’s own rhetoric: the European Commission has described regional cooperation and good-neighboring relations as essential criteria, even creating a “*Berlin Process*” (since 2014) where Western Balkan leaders meet annually (with supportive EU states) to advance connectivity and reconciliation projects.

In sum, the literature surveyed provides a multifaceted understanding of how East-Central Europe’s EU integration experience offers both *positive models and cautionary tales* for the Western Balkans. The key themes can be distilled as follows: (a) *Policy transfer and conditionality*: The “*accession toolbox*” of legal and institutional reforms can travel, but must be adapted to local conditions and rigorously enforced – especially in rule of law and anti-corruption, where earlier enlargements taught the EU to be stricter. (b) *State-building and capacity*: Building effective, transparent institutions is fundamental; ECE showed that even after membership, weak institutions can impede full convergence, so the Balkans must tackle state capture and strengthen administrative capacity pre-accession. (c) *Public attitudes and social reconciliation*: Popular support is high but fragile – maintaining it requires delivering early tangible benefits (like visa liberalization, infrastructure) and addressing nationalist narratives. CEE’s success in reducing some historical animosities (e.g. Poland-Germany) through integration suggests the Balkans can also reframe regional relations via the EU framework. (d) *Regional cooperation as catalyst*: The Visegrád countries’ coordination and the Baltic states’ cooperation facilitated their EU entries; similarly, Western Balkan cooperation (through CEFTA, RCC, and joint projects) is seen as both a requirement of and rehearsal for EU membership. We now turn to a more focused comparison of the East-Central European and Western Balkan experiences, to identify specific lessons in each of these areas.

3. FROM EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE TO THE WESTERN BALKANS: COMPARATIVE ACCESSION EXPERIENCES

3.1. Convergence and the East–West Divide in the EU

The countries of East-Central Europe (ECE) that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 have undergone profound changes, but their experience also reveals the *limits of EU-driven convergence*. Economically, many new members enjoyed an “accession boom” – a period of high growth as they gained access to the single market and EU structural funds. For example, Poland and Slovakia saw GDP per capita rise significantly faster than the EU average in the decade after 2004, narrowing the gap with Western Europe. This prosperity, as Belloni (2009:340) and Sanfey & Milatovic (2020:3) note, reduced social tensions, as competition for scarce resources, which often exacerbates ethnic tensions, was less acute when economies were growing, thereby indirectly aiding minority integration and social peace. Indeed, observers often credit the EU’s cohesion policies with stabilizing new democracies by “*locking in*” economic expectations and giving even rural or poorer regions a stake in the European project (Medve-Balint et al, 2025:5).

However, the recent scholarship cited earlier (Volintiru *et al.*, 2024:783) urges a nuanced view – while income levels have risen, *full convergence remains “intractable” in some areas*. Political developments have in some cases diverged from EU ideals: Hungary’s government, for instance, has been accused of undermining checks and balances and espousing an illiberal ideology contrary to EU values. The *very perception of an East–West divide* – a notion that the “new” Eastern members are different or lagging – has itself become “*politically consequential*”, fueling resentment and Euroscepticism if not addressed. This is a cautionary tale for Western Balkan entrants: joining the EU is not a panacea that automatically erases historical divisions or guarantees liberal democracy. As Kmezić (2020:1) argues, the current enlargement approach “*seems to be slowing down integration rather than accelerating it*”, partly because the *transformative power of the EU has weakened* in the face of internal and external shocks. In practical terms, this means Western Balkan states must over-prepare – not only meeting the minimum criteria but building resilience so that once in the EU, they continue on a positive trajectory rather than regressing.

One concrete lesson is the importance of *post-accession mechanisms*. The EU largely relied on pre-accession conditionality to shape CEE reforms and had limited tools after entry – save for the exceptional Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) imposed on Bulgaria and Romania for judiciary reforms. The mixed outcomes in ECE have led to calls for a more continuous monitoring (some suggest extending CVM-like regimes or staged accession with gradual rights). For the Western Balkans, this debate implies that *accession might be more gradual or conditional*: e.g. recent ideas include a “*phased accession*” where countries enter the single market early but full institutional membership comes later, tied to governance benchmarks. Such innovations aim to keep *momentum and oversight*, addressing the time-inconsistency problem where reforms could stall after the carrot of membership is delivered. In summary, East-Central Europe’s path shows the *rewards of integration (growth, stability)*, but also that *deep convergence* – in governance quality, democratic culture – is a generational project, not fully achieved even after 20 years. The Western Balkans, being on average less developed and with more recent conflicts, will likely need even more sustained support and vigilance to avoid an entrenched two-tier EU.

3.2. Governance, Rule of Law and State Capture

During the Eastern enlargement, governance and rule of law issues (e.g. corruption in Romania, mafia networks in the Baltics) were present, but the EU relied on future improvements, driven by the favorable geopolitical context. In hindsight, democratic backsliding prompted a tougher EU stance toward the Western Balkans. State capture is more severe in the Balkans: while most ECE states managed to build semi-autonomous institutions during transition, Western Balkan countries emerged from war and sanctions with entrenched smuggling and political-criminal networks (Kotras, 2020:7). Reports from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network show that in Bosnia and Herzegovina, entire sectors remain under ethnically based patronage networks—a dynamic less common in countries like Poland or Czechia at accession.

ECE offers both positive and cautionary examples. Estonia and Slovenia made real anti-corruption gains pre-accession, whereas Bulgaria and Romania entered with persistent clientelism, requiring post-accession monitoring via the CVM—and Bulgaria still faces EU criticism in 2025 (Vachudova, 2019:91). Learning from this, the EU now opens and closes Chapter 23 last in the Balkans, aiming to front-load the hardest reforms.

Regional accountability is also encouraged—for example, Croatia is urged to share rule-of-law experience with neighbors.

Despite many action plans, the gap between formal compliance and real reform persists—described as “decoupling” by Richter & Wunsch (2020:41). One solution from the ECE playbook is to strengthen independent watchdogs early on. As in 1990s Hungary and Poland, Serbia and North Macedonia have created agencies like the Anti-Corruption Agency or Special Prosecutor’s Office, though their impact depends on political support. The EU’s support of Romania’s DNA post-2007 illustrates how external backing can make a difference.

Albania’s vetting of judges, launched in 2016 with EU and U.S. support, recalls CEE measures like Czech lustration or Baltic judicial tests. Though courts are now understaffed, the reform is hailed as a model, with similar processes considered in Bosnia and Montenegro. If sustained, it may become a flagship example of effective EU-backed governance reform.

In summary, when comparing governance issues, the Western Balkans might actually need to *exceed* the standards once expected of East-Central Europe in order to convince a now more cautious EU. The concept of “*strict but fair*” conditionality is frequently invoked: strict in that no compromises on core rule-of-law benchmarks are made (a reaction to earlier leniencies), but fair in offering support and acknowledging incremental progress. The literature suggests that this balance is delicate – if conditions are overly strict or seen as ever-shifting, domestic goodwill erodes; if too lenient, real change won’t occur. Therefore, lessons from both the successes and failures of ECE’s integration are guiding the Western Balkans’ approach to governance reform on the road to Brussels.

3.3. Regional Cooperation and Reconciliation: Visegrád to Berlin Process

One of the clearest lessons from East-Central Europe is the power of regional cooperation in accelerating EU integration. The Visegrád Group (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia) coordinated on reforms, negotiations, and infrastructure, which helped synchronize their accession and foster collaboration within the EU. By contrast, the Western Balkans began the 2000s with mistrust and asymmetry—some, like Croatia, feared being delayed by neighbors. As Petričušić (2005:15) noted, early resistance to the EU’s “regional approach” stemmed from fears of collective punishment. Over time, however, cooperation came to be seen as preparation rather than constraint.

The region now hosts overlapping initiatives: the RCC, CEFTA, SEECF, and the Berlin Process, alongside EU-funded cross-border cooperation (CBC) programs that build grassroots ties and reduce animosity. These mirror earlier INTERREG and Euroregion efforts in Central Europe. Still, unresolved disputes—Serbia-Kosovo, Bulgaria–North Macedonia—have hampered deeper cooperation. The EU’s precedent of conditioning accession on dispute resolution, as in Croatia–Slovenia, set a model. The 2018 Prespa Agreement between North Macedonia and Greece, hailed by scholars, illustrates how EU incentives can resolve long-standing conflicts.

Yet challenges persist. Kmezić (2020:3) and Baliqi (2021:23) call for stronger EU mediation and warn against letting disputes stall enlargement. They advocate a dual track: maintaining accession incentives while promoting compromise. Petričušić’s view that cooperation should be an “incentive” still holds true. Initiatives like the Danube Region Strategy show how current EU members and candidates can align on shared goals. Ultimately, regional cooperation is not optional—it’s a rehearsal for EU

membership, building habits of policy alignment and consultation essential for success in Brussels.

East-Central Europe's model of regional cooperation – exemplified by Visegrád and various cross-border initiatives – demonstrates both the *practical benefits* (speaking with a stronger voice, solving shared problems, building trust) and the *symbolic power* (signaling a break from the divisive past) of such collaboration. The Western Balkans have embraced this logic more slowly, but momentum is building through structures like the Berlin Process and RCC. The success of these efforts will directly affect the pace of EU integration: as one EC report put it, “*the road to Brussels runs through the region.*” In the next section, we translate these comparative observations into concrete recommendations for boosting Western Balkan cooperation and EU integration, effectively harnessing the lessons learned from the East-Central European accession wave.

4. LESSONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WESTERN BALKAN INTEGRATION

Drawing together insights from the literature and comparative analysis, we identify several key lessons from East-Central Europe that can inform strategies to *boost cooperation and accelerate EU integration* in the Western Balkans.

4.1. Credible Conditionality with Early Integration “Dividends”

One takeaway from the CEE enlargement is that EU conditionality works best when coupled with *credible rewards*. In the early 2000s, the reward of membership was near-certain for reformist CEE states, creating a powerful incentive. For today's Western Balkans, the path seems more open-ended, risking reform fatigue. The EU should therefore offer *tangible interim dividends* to keep the momentum. This could include phasing in access to certain EU programs and funds *before full membership*. For example, Western Balkan countries might join the *Schengen Area or common market sectors* gradually as they meet benchmarks, rather than waiting for the final accession date. Such incremental integration – a concept already floated in new EU proposals – would mirror how East Germans effectively joined many West German systems even before formal unification. It provides citizens and businesses early proof that the painful reforms yield benefits, thus shoring up public support. The literature by Kmezić (2020:1) supports this approach, suggesting that the current all-or-nothing model is “time-inconsistent” and slows down transformation. Early rewards might include expanded visa-free mobility (important as 5 out of 6 WB countries now have it, with Kosovo just granted in 2024), greater student and labor exchange quotas, and integration into EU transport and energy networks (the EU is already funding “connectivity” projects under the Berlin Process). *Lesson: Maintain credibility* by visibly moving goalposts closer when justified – this was crucial in ECE (e.g. early NATO entry, aid flows, fast-track memberships) and can be replicated.

4.2. Zero Tolerance for State Capture: Strengthen Checks and Balances Pre-Accession

East-Central Europe's experience, particularly the backsliding cases, teaches that any *latent governance pathologies must be tackled before EU entry*, because afterwards the EU's leverage drops. For the Balkans, this means the EU should continue its strict focus on rule-of-law benchmarks, even if it causes short-term friction with local elites. Richter

& Wunsch (2020) bluntly conclude that the EU's past leniency "*contributed to consolidation of detrimental governance patterns*". The revised conditionality (opening Chapters 23/24 first, etc.) is a step in the right direction. We recommend expanding on this by embedding *integrity and transparency requirements* across all negotiation chapters – for instance, in public procurement (Chapter 5) insist on e-procurement systems and independent oversight agencies; in judiciary (Chapter 23) require not just legal changes but a track record of prosecutions of high-level corruption *before* closing the chapter. This was not done for some CEE states, which is why figures implicated in corruption (or even organized crime ties) sometimes evaded justice until after EU entry, if ever. Additionally, the EU should bolster *independent media and civil society* as watchdogs. In CEE, EU funds and political support helped create a vibrant NGO sector that monitored governments (though later some governments pushed back). In the Balkans, the EU can increase funding to local investigative journalism (similar to how it funds cross-border media projects via the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network) and protect NGOs from harassment by making their treatment part of the political criteria. The concept of "*societal capture*", wherein entire societies are enmeshed in patronage, implies that reforms can't just be top-down – they need public demand. Thus, a lesson is to nurture a culture of *civic activism and accountability* during accession, as was seen in parts of ECE (e.g. the strong anti-corruption movements in Romania and Slovakia in the 2000s were partly enabled by EU normative pressure). *Recommendation*: The EU could even tie specific funding (say, parts of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance) to the *involvement of civil society in monitoring reforms*, echoing how participatory budgeting and oversight are encouraged in EU budget support worldwide.

4.3. Regional Cooperation as a Conditional and a Facilitator

The EU should continue to use regional cooperation both as a *yardstick* and a *means* of progress. As a yardstick, it must be clear that attempts to *obstruct neighbors' EU aspirations (or to flame regional tensions)* will backfire on one's own prospects. This principle, born out in Croatia-Slovenia and Greece-North Macedonia cases, needs consistent application. But beyond being a stick, regional cooperation is a carrot in itself – it prepares countries for EU membership by getting them used to collaboration. We recommend that the EU *institutionalize the Berlin Process* outcomes: for instance, the recent agreement to create a *Common Regional Market* (an extension of CEFTA, aiming to emulate four freedoms regionally) should be strongly supported and perhaps made an *interim milestone* in the accession roadmap. Qorraj *et al.* (2024:5) view the Common Regional Market as either a deepening of integration or a "time-winning strategy" by the EU to postpone membership – in either case, if Western Balkans implement it fully (recognizing each other's professional qualifications, removing roaming charges, etc.), it will both improve their economies and ease eventual EU integration. The lesson from Visegrád is that a united regional voice can even influence EU policies. So, encouraging the Western Balkans to form common positions on certain EU matters (like climate or youth policy) even before accession can empower them and signal to EU members that the region will be a value-added, cohesive bloc rather than a fractious add-on. *Recommendation*: The EU could create a format where Western Balkan ministers attend certain EU Council meetings as observers *as a group* (somewhat akin to how V4 often presents united stances). This would reinforce the habit of intraregional consultation. Additionally, cross-border infrastructure (Corridor X highway, Rail links, energy interconnectors) should be fast-tracked – the EU's new *Growth Plan for the Western*

Balkans (2023), worth €6 billion, rightly emphasizes connectivity. Past enlargements show that integrating infrastructure prior to accession (e.g. Baltic states' electricity grid synchronization with the EU) helps avoid bottlenecks later.

4.4. Reconciliation and Transitional Justice: Make it a Core Integration Pillar

Unique to the Western Balkans (as compared to CEE) is the very recent memory of interethnic war. The EU has sometimes treated reconciliation as separate from the acquis chapters, but the lesson from post-WWII European integration (and indeed the Franco-German rapprochement) is that *peace and integration go hand in hand*. Baliqi (2021) argues there will be “*no regional collaboration without dealing with the past*”, so initiatives like the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), the missing persons dialogue, or the Regional War Crimes Verification Commission (RECOM, an NGO-driven project) should receive robust EU backing and be factored into progress assessments. We propose that the EU *expand Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights)* or Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom, Security) to explicitly include *transitional justice metrics* – e.g. cooperation with the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, domestic war crimes trials, measures against genocide denial and hate speech, school curriculum reforms for inclusive history education. These issues may seem outside classic EU law, but they relate to EU values of human rights and are critical for long-term regional stability. The CEE experience offers parallels: for instance, how countries dealt with their communist past (lustration, truth commissions) did not directly affect EU laws but did affect the climate in which reforms took place. The EU informally encouraged CEE states to resolve those issues domestically. In the Balkans, it may need to be more proactive – perhaps convene a *Western Balkans Truth and Reconciliation Conference* under EU auspices, or tie funding for cultural heritage and education to multiethnic projects. *Lesson*: Don't compartmentalize peacebuilding and EU integration; treat them as mutually reinforcing objectives.

4.5. Socio-Economic Convergence and Absorption Capacity

Economic lessons from Eastern enlargement abound. A positive one is that *trade integration with the EU significantly boosted the Western Balkans' economies even before membership*, as seen by the EU now taking ~2/3 of Western Balkan exports and the region's GDP growth picking up in the 2000s. However, Eastern Europe also shows that rapid integration can lead to *imbalances*: deindustrialization in some regions, brain drain of young workers to the West (Baltic states lost significant population to migration post-2004), and dependency on a few sectors. Already, the Western Balkans face severe brain drain – a trend Baliqi links partly to slow EU progress causing young people to lose hope. The EU's new enlargement approach tries to alleviate this by increasing pre-accession funds and investment (the Economic and Investment Plan for WB targets €9 billion for connectivity, green transition, private sector support). We recommend focusing these investments on *skill retention and job creation* for youth, to give potential emigrants reasons to stay. Additionally, improving *absorption capacity for EU funds* is crucial – many Balkan ministries struggle to use all available IPA funds due to limited project management skills. Here, East European countries like Poland, which excelled at absorbing structural funds (sometimes above 95% utilization), can mentor Balkan administrations. Twinning programs should be ramped up, pairing, say, *Polish and Ukrainian* experts with Bosnian or Albanian counterparts on how to design

projects that meet EU criteria. *Lesson from CEE agriculture*: as one study put it, EU membership “*resulted in a total change of agricultural policy*” in countries like Poland, bringing yields up but also challenging small farmers. The Balkans should prepare their farmers and SMEs early through pilot projects and gradual integration into EU value chains. For example, allow Western Balkan companies to participate in EU supply chains (through the common market aspects of the CRM, etc.) so that by the time of accession they are competitive. The overarching lesson is *preparation and adaptation*: East-Central Europe had the PHARE, ISPA, SAPARD programs to get ready; the Western Balkans have IPA but perhaps need a tailored “WB-Accelerator” program focusing on areas of persistent weakness (e.g. public administration reform, digitalization of government services). Strengthening these areas not only helps meet EU criteria but also improves daily governance, yielding benefits irrespective of timelines.

4.6. Managing EU Internal Dynamics

Lastly, ECE’s journey illuminates the importance of engaging with *EU member states’ concerns* to avoid unexpected roadblocks. The Western Balkans face some skepticism among segments of the public in certain EU countries (enlargement fatigue, fears of migration or organized crime). Instead of dismissing these, Balkan countries and EU supporters should address them head-on – for instance, by highlighting positive contributions of current Balkan diasporas in the EU, and by actively participating in European programs (sports, culture, research) to build people-to-people goodwill. In the late 1990s, CEE governments lobbied EU publics (through cultural diplomacy, media outreach) to present a favorable image; similar efforts now (a “*Balkan Voices in Europe*” campaign, perhaps) could mitigate misperceptions. It’s also worth noting that *geopolitical shifts* – like the Ukraine war – have somewhat rejuvenated enlargement discussions by reminding Europe of the strategic importance of its neighborhood. The Western Balkans can leverage this by positioning themselves as reliable partners aligned with EU foreign policy (most have, for example, joined EU sanctions on Russia, except notable issues with Serbia’s stance). Highlighting this alignment addresses Western European concerns about admitting countries that might side with rival powers. In short, a lesson from ECE (and now Ukraine’s candidacy) is that *enlargement is not only a technical process but a political one* – winning hearts and minds in existing member states is part of the job of candidate countries.

In implementing these recommendations, a cooperative effort is needed: Western Balkan leaders must have the vision and courage to sometimes take domestically difficult steps (as North Macedonia’s leaders did with Prespa), and the EU and its member states must reward and acknowledge these steps, keeping the integration door wide open. The story of East-Central Europe’s path to the EU – from the early 1990s chaos to EU membership and subsequent growth – should inspire the Western Balkans that such transformation is achievable. Conversely, the EU must remember the “*renewed dynamism*” that enlargement brought to the Union in 2004 – an enlarged EU can be a stronger, more culturally rich and secure EU. The Western Balkans, with roughly 18 million people, will never be as large a shock as the inclusion of 100 million CEE citizens was; the EU can surely absorb them if it prepares well (and indeed must, to complete the unification of Europe).

5. CONCLUSION

East-Central Europe's EU integration experience offers a rich repository of lessons for the Western Balkans' current and future efforts to join the Union. *Comparative analysis reveals* that while contexts differ – the Western Balkans face the dual challenges of post-socialist and post-conflict transition – many fundamentals of successful Europeanization remain consistent. These include a firm commitment to *the rule of law and democratic institutions*, the importance of *economic and administrative preparedness*, and the transformative impact of a *credible accession perspective*. The ECE countries demonstrated how intensive reforms coupled with regional solidarity could propel even formerly authoritarian societies into the European mainstream within a decade. They also taught the EU that consolidation of democracy is an ongoing process: ensuring that initial reforms are deep and sustainable is far preferable to dealing with backsliding after the fact. Accordingly, the EU has adjusted its approach for the Balkans by toughening conditionality and integrating conflict-resolution into the enlargement paradigm.

A central insight of this paper is encapsulated in the maxim that “*the road to Brussels runs through the region.*” The Western Balkans will reach the EU only by strengthening ties among themselves – through trade, infrastructure, and people-to-people contact – much as the states of Central Europe did in the 1990s. East-Central Europe serves as both *a model and a mirror*: a model in showing that neighbors can jointly advance and even *accelerate integration through cooperation* (the Visegrád example, regional advocacy, etc.), and a mirror in reflecting challenges that might also beset the Balkans if not proactively addressed (persistent corruption, regional disparities, populist politics). By taking these lessons to heart, Western Balkan leaders – supported by a reinvigorated EU commitment – can design a pathway that maximizes the advantages of hindsight. Already, initiatives like the Common Regional Market and joint regional institutions (e.g. RYCO for youth cooperation) echo the patterns that worked in Central Europe, adapted to local realities.

There is also a *moral imperative*: completing the European integration of the Western Balkans would fulfill the promise of Thessaloniki and ensure that the EU's unifying mission, which successfully reunited Eastern Europe with the West, is not halted at the Balkan peninsula's edge due to complacency or fatigue. The cost of failure would be high – a perpetually unstable enclave surrounded by the EU, vulnerable to external malign influence and draining its human capital across the Union's borders. Conversely, the benefits of success echo those seen after 2004: more secure and prosperous neighbors, new markets and cultural riches added to the EU mosaic, and the *definitive burying of old enmities* under the weight of shared European identity.

In conclusion, “*Boosting cooperation in the European integration process*” is not just a slogan but a strategic necessity for the Western Balkans. The experience of East-Central Europe – its accomplishments and its ongoing struggles – provides a guide for what to emulate and what to avoid. If the Western Balkans can harness regional cooperation as effectively, commit to rigorous reforms as sincerely, and keep the end goal of EU membership as vividly in sight as the ECE countries once did, then their integration, too, can shift from a distant aspiration to a tangible reality. The European Union, for its part, must apply the lessons of past enlargements by being both supportive and demanding in the right measures, keeping its door open while guarding its values. As one scholar aptly put it, *enlargement is Europe's “most effective foreign policy” tool*

for peace and democracy – in the case of the Western Balkans, it is a tool that, if wielded wisely, will not only transform the region but also enrich the Union that welcomes it.

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