

Balkan Think Tanks Convention IV

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Timișoara

SUMMARY REPORT

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Introduction

Balkan Think Tanks Convention is a gathering of think tanks focused on political research. The convention aims to enhance dialogue and cooperation among think tanks in the Balkans and Türkiye, develop a regional perspective for understanding and addressing common challenges, and discuss innovative ideas for region-wide policy outcomes. The event is led by the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), a leading think tank in Türkiye, and supported by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB).

The first edition of the Balkan Think Tanks Convention took place in Ankara on June 10-12, 2015, with 30 think tanks and research institutions from twelve countries participating. The second edition was organized on November 3-4, 2016, in Pristina, Kosovo, in partnership with the Democracy for Development Institute (D4D). Attended by 27 institutions from twelve countries, the general theme of the second edition was “The Renewed Strategic Importance of the Balkans.” The third edition, titled “Furthering Cooperation under Geopolitical Challenges,” took place in Ankara on September 7-9, 2022, bringing together 32 institutions from ten countries.

With the collaboration of SETA, New Strategy Center (NSC), West University of Timișoara, and YTB, the fourth edition of the Balkan Think Tanks Convention was held on June 6, 2024, in Timișoara, Romania. One full day of an intensive program consisted of the five roundtable sessions below:

- 1) The Balkans and Türkiye in a Transforming Global Geopolitics
- 2) Main Challenges in Regional Security and Politics
- 3) Assessing the EU Enlargement Process
- 4) Regional and Global Security Dynamics: Turkish and Romanian Perspectives
- 5) Furthering Cooperation in the Balkans

During these sessions, experts affiliated with 15 institutions from twelve countries discussed current political and security-related issues faced by the Balkans and Türkiye. The first three sessions each featured four interventions, followed by an open roundtable discussion. The last two sessions were attended by high-level officials from Türkiye and Romania as keynote discussants.

This report provides a general summary of the roundtable sessions, including the main points of discussion and policy recommendations. Since the Convention was held under the Chatham House rule, the names and affiliations of the speakers are not specified.



This report summarizes the remarks made during the workshop.







Session I: The Balkans and Türkiye in a Transforming Global Geopolitics

Peace, stability, and development in the Balkans and the Black Sea region are closely tied to broader global dynamics. The global geopolitical landscape is undergoing significant transformation, marked by shifting strategic balances and various political, economic, and social challenges. The war in Ukraine, tensions in the Middle East, the rise of China, and uncertainties about the Western world are indicators of turbulence in global strategic balances. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and the energy transition have emerged as global challenges affecting the Balkans and the Black Sea region in many ways.

A significant portion of the discussion focused on the impact of external influences and geopolitical competition on the region. The uncertainty about how the Ukraine war will unfold and the possibility of the Balkans turning into an arena for great power competition is worrying. Some speakers cautioned against allowing the region to become merely a front in a renewed East-West confrontation. One participant stressed the need to catch up with global developments and continue building on previous achievements, stressing the importance of regional cooperation and dialogue.

The ongoing war in Ukraine is a significant factor

influencing the geopolitical landscape, with potential ripple effects on regional stability, energy security, and political alignments. Statements by Russian officials about expanding “strategic borders” beyond geographical ones have raised concerns about potential Russian expansionism in the region. Some speakers drew attention to Russian influence in the Balkans, noting particularly its ties through Orthodox Christianity and Slavic cultural connections. Russia’s use of energy as a tool of influence was also noted, as well as its potential to exploit existing tensions and frozen conflicts in the region to undermine Western integration efforts. China’s growing economic presence was also identified as a factor potentially affecting regional politics and relations with the European Union and the United States. One participant argued that some regional leaders find it more expedient to engage in transactional relations with China rather than adopting EU standards.

The United States’ role in the region was discussed in the context of its broader global strategy. Participants commented that the result of the upcoming U.S. elections may lead to a significant shift in American foreign policy, which would affect, directly or indirectly, politics and security in the Balkans and the Black Sea. One speaker pointed out that the situation in Ukraine is the most challenging issue, with uncertain outcomes, especially if there’s a change in U.S. leadership.

Under these circumstances, the EU has increased responsibility to fill the geopolitical vacuum in the Bal-

kans. EU membership is largely desired in the Western Balkans for attaining better stability and standards of living, and the aspiration for EU membership is a key driver for reforms and development in the region. To maximize the geopolitical impact of EU integration, one speaker suggested another “big bang” enlargement that would include not only the Western Balkans but also Türkiye and Moldova. However, another speaker found this proposal unrealistic given the current political climate within the EU.

Participants consistently emphasized the need for countries in the region to work together in addressing common challenges and pursuing shared goals. NATO membership was discussed as a crucial element of the region’s security architecture, with Türkiye’s role as a long-standing NATO member being particularly noted. The discussion also touched upon challenges faced by NATO in the region, including issues with some member states.

In discussions about Türkiye’s role in the region and its broader geopolitical positioning, participants acknowledged its balanced approach. Türkiye’s multifaceted foreign policy, which seeks to balance its Western orientation with relationships in other regions, was highlighted. One speaker compared Türkiye’s approach to that of Germany and Italy, maintaining strong ties with the West while developing relationships with other regions. Regarding the war in Ukraine, Türkiye’s stance was described as balanced but not impartial, condemning Russian aggression while maintaining channels of communication with both sides. Türkiye’s role in facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties and its efforts in initiatives like the Black Sea Grain Deal were cited as examples of its diplomatic capabilities.

The future of relations between Türkiye and the United States was also briefly discussed. A discussant attributed the main challenge between Ankara and Washington to the latter’s lack of understanding of the former’s security concerns, particularly with re-

gard to terrorism. Some participants suggested that potential changes in U.S. leadership could lead to a recalibration of policies by Ankara and Washington towards each other. Even so, Türkiye’s stance on territorial integrity and opposition to changes in regional borders are expected to remain firm principles of its foreign policy.

Participants addressed major political issues in the region, including the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, tensions between Serbia and Kosovo, and recent political developments in North Macedonia, in the context of how they might be influenced by external powers. Speakers emphasized the need for continued dialogue and cooperation to resolve these longstanding disputes while also acknowledging the challenges posed by nationalist rhetoric and historical grievances.

Demographic challenges stemming from both global and regional conditions are a significant concern for many Balkan countries. Participants underlined the impact of emigration, particularly of young and skilled workers, on the region’s economic prospects and social fabric. This brain drain potentially affects countries’ ability to implement necessary reforms and maintain competitiveness in the global economy. The aging population in many Balkan countries can also influence political dynamics and policy priorities in the coming years. Another potential issue is the influx of new immigrants to the Balkans and the challenges of integrating them into Balkan societies.

Concerns were raised about the rise of right-wing populism and challenges to democratic norms in some Balkan countries. One speaker suggested that the inability to halt Russian aggression is seen as strengthening the appeal of authoritarian models in some countries. Another speaker claimed that the prolongation of the war in Ukraine or any Russian gains from it could further embolden right-wing political forces across the Balkans, challenging the West not only in geopolitical terms but also as a civilizational model.





Session II: Main Challenges in Regional Security and Politics

Despite the absence of major conflicts since the early 2000s, the Balkans continues to face political and security challenges. Unresolved issues from the past still shape the political agenda across the region, such as the lack of normalization between Serbia and Kosovo, strife between nationalist actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and identity-related disputes involving North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Greece. While major conflict in the Balkans is unlikely due to the lack of permissive conditions for war, these problems hinder regional harmony and development and complicate the Euro-Atlantic integration processes of the Western Balkan countries.

Recent political developments across the region highlight that problems once considered resolved can resurface. In North Macedonia, the victory of the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE party in both presidential and parliamentary elections has marked a significant shift from the previous government in its rhetoric regarding agreements with Greece and Bulgaria. The new government will face the challenge of balancing its pre-election rhetoric with the practical necessities of international agreements and EU membership aspirations.

The foreign policy approaches of some Western Balkan countries suggest growing pragmatism. Serbia, in particular, formulates its foreign policy along the lines of transactionalism and bilateralism. A speaker described Serbia's current foreign policy as a "two plus two" one, with the EU and Russia as background pillars, and the U.S. and China as primary partners. In its relations with Europe, Serbia prefers to engage in transactional relations with individual EU member states rather than following a Brussels-focused policy. In recent years, Serbia has advanced its defense cooperation with the U.S. while cultivating closer ties with China. A discussant claimed that Serbia's current foreign policy orientation complicates its prospects of becoming an EU member, which requires adopting particular values.

The normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, critical for regional stability, has stalled as both sides show reluctance to make concessions due to deep mutual mistrust. Belgrade feels no incentive toward recognizing Kosovo, while Pristina demands more reciprocity before implementing previous agreements. The incident in Banjska in September 2023 demonstrated the potential for localized violent incidents. Kosovo's path to EU and NATO membership is seen as dependent on resolving its relationship with Serbia, which continues to use the Kosovo issue for domestic political purposes. The build-up of special security units in Serbia was mentioned as a potential concern for neighboring countries.

Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to face internal challenges related to its complex constitutional structure and ethnic divisions. The issue of legitimate ethnic representation was discussed, with examples showing how the current system can lead to political

deadlock and prevent effective governance. The actions of leaders like Milorad Dodik and Dragan Čović in promoting ethnic-based governance and control over strategic assets were highlighted as ongoing challenges to the country's stability and functionality. The role of neighboring countries, particularly Serbia and Croatia, in Bosnia's internal affairs was mentioned as another matter of concern. A speaker asserted that Croatia was playing the dual role of supporting Bosnia's EU candidacy while backing ethnic Croat leaders who push for further ethnic-based division within the country.

The EU integration process remains a key factor in shaping regional dynamics in the Western Balkans. Although EU membership is a stated goal for all countries, enthusiasm has declined due to disappointment with EU enlargement. Some participants claimed that the EU's lack of follow-through on its promises diminished its credibility and leverage in the region. The experience of North Macedonia, which made significant concessions for EU integration but still faces obstacles, has had a negative impact on perceptions of the EU throughout the region. The declining credibility of EU enlargement as a unifying goal has left a vacuum being filled by nationalism, external influences, and pragmatic dealings with various global powers. Given the EU's declining leverage, the US might need to take a more active role in mediating regional disputes, particularly in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. A speaker suggested that the EU could potentially revitalize its credibility by focusing on Montenegro's accession process, as it seems relatively easier than those of other countries in the region.

Russian influence, which operates through a combination of political ties, energy dependency, and cultural affinity, has palpable effects on the Western Balkans. The Serbian Orthodox Church plays a role in

extending Russian influence in Serbia and Montenegro, while it does not have a homogeneous political position in Bosnia and Herzegovina, potentially offering opportunities for reconciliation in some local settings. Some participants argued that the West's lack of strategic vision has allowed this influence to grow, and only after the Russian invasion of Ukraine did the West increase its attention on Russian influence. However, a speaker raised the concern that focusing largely on Russia might overshadow other important regional issues and dynamics.

The importance of strengthening regional cooperation and reconciliation was emphasized. As a positive observation, one participant stated that despite political tensions, there are often normal interactions between communities. However, another participant warned that the decrease in external funding and support for peacebuilding initiatives could increase distance between communities and make it more difficult to de-escalate tensions in the future.

Some discussants highlighted demographic challenges facing the Balkan countries, with significant rates of emigration, particularly of young and skilled people, negatively impacting economic development and social stability. Brain drain is seen as a major threat to the region's future, potentially complicating efforts at political reform, exacerbating existing problems, and making conflict resolution more difficult.

The discussion also touched on newer challenges facing the region, including the impact of COVID-19, which accelerated digitalization but also created new vulnerabilities. Drawing attention to the region's shortcomings in governance, a speaker underlined that tackling corruption, which erodes public trust in politics, requires increasing the resilience of national institutions. The issue of social media manipulation in elections was mentioned.





Session III: Assessing the EU Enlargement Process

Despite the European Union's continued assertions that enlargement remains a top priority, the enlargement process for the Western Balkans has faced significant challenges and delays in recent years. No country in the region has become an EU member since Croatia's accession in 2013. Nevertheless, the war in Ukraine has injected new urgency into the EU's enlargement agenda, reviving its strategic importance for its geopolitical interests.

Some speakers underlined that the enlargement policy has historically been successful in transforming candidate countries and bringing tangible benefits to member states. The economic impact of EU membership was emphasized, with examples from Romania and Bulgaria demonstrating significant GDP growth and positive financial flows after accession. For instance, Romania nearly doubled its GDP per capita in the two decades following accession and received a net positive flow of around 65 billion euros from the EU. These economic benefits were presented as evidence of the continued attractiveness and importance of EU membership for candidate countries.

The six Western Balkan countries have shown varying degrees of progress in their path to EU mem-

bership. Montenegro and Serbia, which started accession negotiations in 2012 and 2014 respectively, have made limited progress toward membership, with Montenegro provisionally closing only three chapters out of 35, and Serbia closing two. North Macedonia and Albania only recently began negotiations in 2022. Bosnia and Herzegovina is yet to achieve the necessary degree of compliance with membership criteria, while Kosovo has not yet been granted candidate status.

A speaker categorized these countries into three groups based on their current status and challenges in the accession process. Serbia was identified as a country that seems to lack genuine political will to join the EU, instead seeking to benefit from EU funds without making necessary changes. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo face challenges related to their statehood and internal political dynamics. Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia were seen as more eager to advance in the process but still face difficulties. Montenegro was specified as potentially having the best chances for EU membership, provided it fulfills economic criteria and avoids identity-related tensions. Albania was noted for its determination, though it still needs to eliminate the problems with corruption and democratic weaknesses. North Macedonia's progress is complicated by bilateral issues with Bulgaria and potential tensions with Greece over the Prespa Agreement.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has revived interest in enlargement as a strategic necessity for the EU. Some member states, notably France, have recalibrated their positions to view enlargement

as a condition for European power and strategic autonomy. This shift in perspective has led to renewed political will in Brussels and European capitals to advance the enlargement process. The 2022 Council decisions to grant candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, adopted in 2023, were cited as concrete examples demonstrating this political will. However, the progress so far has remained slow and limited.

Some discussants argued that the main reason for the slow pace of enlargement lies with the limited progress achieved by candidate countries in terms of reforms. The hesitation among EU member states about enlargement is attributed to the shortcomings of candidates in meeting the required criteria. A speaker claimed that officials in candidate countries often underestimate the depth and difficulty of the reforms required. Beyond involving merely technical conditions, the accession process demands substantial transformations that affect not only institutions but also entrenched interests, including those of political elites.

There are also challenges to be addressed by the EU to increase credibility and effectiveness of the enlargement process. Some speakers highlighted the importance of reforming decision-making processes, such as adopting qualified majority voting for foreign policy decisions. The future of EU policies, particularly the Common Agricultural Policy and Cohesion Policy, will need to be addressed in light of potential enlargement, especially considering the significant resources that would be required to integrate countries like Ukraine. However, it was noted that some of the countries pushing hardest for enlargement are also those most resistant to such internal reforms. A discussant from the Western Balkans criticized the financial resources allocated to support the enlargement process as inadequate compared to the funds available to EU member states. Another discussant from an EU member country responded that this disparity in funding is a result of being part of the decision-making processes, which makes a big difference compared to being outside the EU.

Bilateral disputes between candidate countries and EU member states were identified as another major obstacle to the enlargement process. The case of Bulgaria's veto on North Macedonia's accession talks was discussed as a prominent example, with some speakers stressing the need for adherence to existing agreements and caution in any potential changes to established positions.

The impact of internal EU politics on the enlargement process was also discussed, particularly the rise of far-right parties in Europe. While some far-right parties are seen as pro-Ukraine and potentially supportive of enlargement, there are concerns that they might prioritize Ukraine's accession to the detriment of Western Balkan countries. Global political changes, such as the outcome of the US elections, may also impact the course and pace of the EU enlargement process. Some participants expressed concern about the sustainability of the current geopolitical logic behind enlargement and the potential for shifting priorities in the face of global political changes.

The discussion also addressed the role of civil society and public opinion in the enlargement process. In Montenegro, for example, recent polls show record-high public support for EU membership, which was seen as a crucial asset that can drive the reform process. The importance of involving local governments and NGOs in policy-making, implementation, and monitoring processes was stressed as crucial for ensuring the relevance and effectiveness of EU-related reforms.

Some discussants touched upon the need for a development-based approach to enlargement. A speaker advocated for early access to EU cohesion policy for Western Balkan countries. This approach was seen as a way to accelerate regional integration and close the convergence gap more quickly. The importance of linking funding to reforms was highlighted as a potential mechanism for incentivizing necessary changes in candidate countries.

The role of the Berlin Process in supporting regional cooperation and addressing common challenges in the Western Balkans was briefly discussed. A speaker mentioned initiatives such as mobility agreements and efforts to support professional mobility, environmental sustainability, and economic integration as positive steps, and added that these efforts need further expansion to ensure broader social inclusion and effectiveness.

Discussants also addressed Türkiye's long-standing EU membership aspirations. While acknowledging that the process is currently blocked with no immediate prospects for change, they recommended that the EU should include Türkiye back in the enlargement agenda. This perspective emphasized the strategic importance of improving relations and finding constructive ways to engage, particularly given the current geopolitical context in the Black Sea region and beyond.



Session IV

Regional and Global Security
Dynamics: Turkish and
Romanian Perspectives



Session IV: Regional and Global Security Dynamics: Turkish and Romanian Perspectives

The Balkans and the Black Sea region face numerous security challenges, with the war in Ukraine being the most pressing and immediate threat. The geopolitical consequences of the war are far-reaching and difficult to predict, largely depending on its duration and outcome. This uncertainty necessitates collective vigilance and action by regional partners to minimize negative impacts and ensure their collective security.

Türkiye contributes to regional security through various platforms, including KFOR in Kosovo and the newly-launched trilateral task force with Bulgaria and Romania for clearing mines in the Black Sea. That being said, Türkiye's security interests extend beyond the Balkans and the Black Sea, with significant attention on conflicts in the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Palestine. A speaker noted Türkiye's efforts to address security challenges in Syria and Iraq, including initiatives aimed at promoting economic development to enhance regional stability and prevent migration flows. Türkiye's engagements with the Caucasus and Central Asian countries were also mentioned as part of its broader security strategy.

Romania's significant contributions to EU and NATO missions in the Western Balkans, its involvement in regional security organizations, and its trilateral

cooperation with Bulgaria and Türkiye on Black Sea demining efforts exemplify the country's commitment to regional security. The development of gas resources in Romania's Black Sea economic zone was discussed as a potential contributor to regional energy security and economic stability, with Romania projected to become the largest gas producer in the EU by 2027.

In the face of Russian aggression, Romania's position as a frontline state was emphasized, underscoring its commitment to supporting Ukraine. A speaker detailed various forms of assistance provided to Ukraine, including training Ukrainian military personnel under the EU Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM) and participating in the U.S.-led Ukraine Defense Contact Group. Romania's future role in training Ukrainian F-16 pilots was also mentioned, demonstrating its ongoing commitment to enhancing Ukraine's defense capabilities. Romania's active participation in NATO's deterrence and defense posture was highlighted, with various multinational NATO structures hosted by Romania being presented as crucial elements of NATO's eastern flank defense. Romania's contributions to allied defense efforts in Poland and the Baltic states were also mentioned, presenting the country's role as both a beneficiary and provider of collective security within the Alliance.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has dramatically altered security perceptions and priorities in the Balkans and the Black Sea region. A speaker asserted that Russia's malicious acts pose a significant threat to regional stability. Concerns were raised that as the conflict in Ukraine continues, Russia may engage in more subversive activities to destabilize the Balkans

in order to divert Western attention from Ukraine. As the war persists, Russia is likely to intensify its efforts to undermine NATO and EU unity using various levers such as energy dependence and hybrid warfare tactics. Discussants stressed the need for concerted efforts among NATO and EU members to address emerging threats, strengthen deterrence capabilities, and support partners facing Russian aggression.

Türkiye maintains a nuanced position in the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. While firmly supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity since 2014, condemning the unprovoked war, and providing diplomatic and technical support to Ukraine, Türkiye has maintained open channels of communication with Russia. This approach allows Türkiye to play a potentially crucial role in diplomatic efforts and conflict resolution.

The possibility of a frozen conflict in Ukraine was considered, with potential implications for regional stability and the risk of renewed Russian aggression in the future. A discussant claimed that Russia's ultimate goal appears to be the destruction of Ukraine as an independent state, potentially leading to further territorial ambitions in the region, including Moldova. This scenario was presented as a significant concern for Romania, with one speaker claiming that a Russian presence at the Danube mouth would be a nightmare for Romanian security interests, likening it to the situation in 1940 when Romania lost 40 percent of its territory.

The threat of hybrid warfare and the need for resilience against such tactics were discussed. Some speakers noted Russia's use of economic leverage, disinformation campaigns, and cyber-attacks as part of its broader strategy to undermine Western unity and support for Ukraine. The importance of strengthening societal resilience and maintaining public support for security policies was emphasized.

The potential for escalation and the risk of nuclear weapons use were also addressed. A speaker warned that Russian territorial gains in Ukraine could potentially lead to the end of nuclear non-proliferation, as neighboring countries might seek nuclear weapons for security. While discussants acknowledged the difficulty in predicting Russian actions, they stressed the importance of maintaining a strong deterrence posture and international unity in the face of nuclear threats.

Long-term strategic thinking was encouraged, with speakers urging policymakers to consider the potential consequences of various scenarios, including a Russian victory in Ukraine or a hastily negotiated peace agreement. There were warnings about the risks of a premature end to the conflict in Ukraine, which could leave a large, militarized, and potentially

unstable country. The need to carefully manage any eventual Russian defeat or regime change was also discussed, with participants noting the potential for sudden and unpredictable changes in Russia's political landscape. The need to balance short-term crisis management with long-term strategic goals was underlined, with one speaker arguing that supporting Ukraine now would be less costly than dealing with the consequences of a possible Russian victory.

The Black Sea region's strategic importance was emphasized throughout the discussion. Speakers highlighted the need for a comprehensive approach to Black Sea security, involving NATO, the EU, and regional cooperation mechanisms. The potential for increased militarization of the Black Sea was debated, with the Turkish perspective opposing further militarization and stressing the importance of existing frameworks like the Montreux Convention. In response, a speaker from Romania suggested thinking outside the box to address security challenges, citing historical examples of creative solutions.

Energy security is a crucial aspect of regional stability. The development of gas fields in the Black Sea by Romania, Türkiye, and Bulgaria can be a potential game-changer for regional energy independence. Participants discussed the possibility of these countries becoming significant gas exporters, potentially reducing the region's dependence on Russian energy and enhancing economic stability in the Balkans and beyond. A speaker underlined the need for cooperation among Black Sea countries in protecting critical infrastructure and developing energy resources.

In addressing the security risks of the Balkans and the Black Sea region, discussants emphasized the importance of strengthening regional cooperation mechanisms and dialogue. The discussion touched upon various security-related regional cooperation formats, including the Bucharest Nine, the South-Eastern Europe Defense Ministerial Process, and the Romania-Poland-Türkiye trilateral mechanism. These initiatives were presented as important platforms for addressing common security challenges and fostering cohesion within and beyond the Balkans and the Black Sea. Some speakers stressed the need for sustained support to Ukraine and Moldova, both in terms of security assistance and economic development. The role of civil society and public engagement in security matters was also mentioned, with a speaker stressing the importance of educating younger generations and maintaining societal resilience in the face of security challenges.





Session V:

Furthering Cooperation in the Balkans

Following the crises and conflicts of the 1990s, various cooperation initiatives and integration processes were developed in the Balkans, leading to significant transformation. However, there is still room for more effective and sustainable cooperation to address regional challenges together.

The EU's enlargement policy and NATO integration were discussed as key external processes shaping regional cooperation. It was noted that four Western Balkan states are now NATO allies, marking significant progress in regional security and stability. However, EU enlargement has been slower, with speakers calling for a more dynamic and credible enlargement policy to provide a tangible European perspective for citizens in the region. The EU's opening of accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova was described as a historic decision demonstrating the EU's capacity to follow through on its promises. Some speakers argued for revamping the EU enlargement process, suggesting new tools to address pressing challenges in the integration process. However, it was also acknowledged that the integration process is long and can be affected by unpredictable events.

While the importance of support and engagement from the EU, NATO, and other partners was recognized as crucial for the region's stability and development, participants underlined the need for Balkan countries to take the lead in addressing their challenges. Home-grown cooperation initiatives and platforms are crucial

for strengthening regional ownership. The South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) is a key platform, being the only indigenous initiative that includes all 13 countries in the region. Its value lies in providing a forum for dialogue even between countries with tensions, such as Serbia and Kosovo. As the operational arm of SEECP, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) plays a crucial role in implementing regional initiatives. A speaker highlighted the Southeast Europe 2030 Agenda as an important regional framework aligned with UN Sustainable Development Goals. Adopted during Türkiye's SEECP chairmanship in 2021, it aims to facilitate development across all 13 SEECP countries, not just the Western Balkans, promoting a more inclusive approach to regional development. The Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) was mentioned as another significant platform for fostering economic ties, though it was noted that BSEC's effectiveness has been hampered by complications related to Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

Concerns were raised about the potential negative effects of external powers, particularly China and Russia, on the region's inner coherence. China's growing economic presence through infrastructure investments and loans was highlighted as a potential challenge, with some speakers cautioning that Chinese activities could lead to long-term economic dependence. Russia's influence was discussed in the context of its aggression against Ukraine and its impact on regional organizations like BSEC.

Several challenges to furthering cooperation in the Balkans were identified, including unresolved regional problems, political rivalries, slow progress in EU integration, and the impact of external conflicts,

particularly the war in Ukraine, on regional dynamics. The need for enhanced economic cooperation was stressed, with speakers suggesting that the region is not realizing its true potential due to low connectivity. One participant highlighted the stark contrast in travel times within the region, noting that a 550 km journey within Türkiye takes four hours, while a similar distance between Bucharest and Istanbul takes ten hours.

Despite these challenges, speakers pointed to opportunities for enhanced cooperation. These included leveraging existing regional frameworks like SEECP and RCC to foster dialogue and joint initiatives, using EU enlargement and NATO integration processes as catalysts for reforms and cooperation, and building on positive bilateral relationships, such as the strategic partnership between Romania and Türkiye, as models for regional cooperation. One speaker cited the Belgrade-Sarajevo highway project as a positive example of improving regional connectivity, resulting from the trilateral cooperation mechanism involving Türkiye, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Serbia.

Regarding EU-led initiatives, some speakers called for a more inclusive approach that considers all countries in the region, regardless of their current status in EU or NATO integration processes. One speaker criticized the use of the term “Western Balkans,” arguing that it can be divisive, and suggested more inclusive terms, such as “Balkans Eight” (including Türkiye and Moldova), to better reflect regional solidarity and cooperation efforts.

During the discussion, participants emphasized the need for a multifaceted approach to furthering cooperation in the Balkans, including strengthening regional institutions, accelerating European integration processes, improving physical and economic connectivity, and fostering a sense of shared regional identity and common purpose. A speaker added that adopting European values, including free and fair elections and market economy principles, would strengthen regional cooperation and resilience. Other policy recommendations included strengthening civil society and developing a more inclusive regional narrative.

PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

BALKAN THINK TANKS CONVENTION IV, TIMIȘOARA, JUNE 6, 2024

Institution	Country
<i>Cooperation and Development Institute</i>	<i>Albania</i>
<i>Atlantic Initiative</i>	<i>Bosnia and Herzegovina</i>
<i>ECFR Sofia</i>	<i>Bulgaria</i>
<i>Institute for Development and International Relations</i>	<i>Croatia</i>
<i>Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy</i>	<i>Greece</i>
<i>Kosovar Centre for Security Studies</i>	<i>Kosovo</i>
<i>Center for Democracy and Human Rights</i>	<i>Montenegro</i>
<i>Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis"</i>	<i>North Macedonia</i>
<i>New Strategy Center</i>	<i>Romania</i>
<i>Belgrade Center for Security Policy</i>	<i>Serbia</i>
<i>International Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies</i>	<i>Slovenia</i>
<i>Diplomacy Academy</i>	<i>Türkiye</i>
<i>Foreign Policy Institute</i>	<i>Türkiye</i>
<i>Marmara University Research Center for International Relations</i>	<i>Türkiye</i>
<i>Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA)</i>	<i>Türkiye</i>











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