

PRESS RELEASE

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wiiw publishes new study on Western Balkan EU accession prospects

- *The new **2025 target for Western Balkan EU accession** represents a **highly ambitious best-case scenario**, which could serve as a powerful incentive for countries in the region to speed up their reform agendas. We do not completely rule out at least Montenegro and Serbia joining the bloc by 2025 or shortly thereafter.*
- *Economic development and connectivity in the six Western Balkan countries aiming to join the EU is hamstrung by **intra-regional political conflicts**, and as a result wiiw welcome the European Commission's new focus on taking a more active role in resolving these issues.*
- *In addition, the six **countries must tackle their governance and infrastructure deficits, as well as expanding their industrial bases**, in order to drive sustained economic convergence and meet EU economic accession criteria.*
- *While the **economic influence of third parties in the region** is not as significant as often portrayed, it could increase in the future, particularly in the case of China.*

These are the main conclusions of a new study by the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw) to coincide with EU-Western Balkans summit in Sofia on May 17th.

The EU-Western Balkans summit will take place on May 17th in Sofia, with the stated aim of reenergising the accession process. 15 years after the Thessaloniki promise, most countries in the region are still stuck in the waiting room.

The European Commission has set a target date of 2025 for Western Balkan EU accession, while also outlining a broader [new strategy](#) which includes Brussels taking a more active role in solving political disputes in the region, and upgrading infrastructure as part of the [Berlin Process](#).

We find that the obstacles facing the six countries on the road to accession are significant. Broadly, we conclude that the region faces four major challenges over the next decade, all of which matter for accession:

- First, **political conflicts** are a major barrier to economic connectivity in the region. Without progress on these, purely technocratic measures to improve regional connectivity will not achieve the desired results.
- Second, the Western Balkans has a serious **governance deficit**, even compared with Romania and Bulgaria at the time of their accession in 2007. On current trends, none of the six countries will meet EU governance standards by 2025.
- Third, the Western Balkan countries suffer from an **infrastructure deficit**, which is a barrier to improving competitiveness and intra-regional trade (a key focus of recent European Commission [progress reports](#)). In this regard, the Berlin process—coupled with the political steps outlined above—is positive.

- Finally, the region must upgrade and **expand its industrial base**. Manufacturing accounts for a small share of GDP in much of the region, which is a barrier to productivity growth, innovation, employment and the expansion of the services sector.

China is an increasingly important competitor to the EU in the region

The economic influence of third parties in the Western Balkans is not as significant as often portrayed. It is hard to overstate the EU's dominance in the region's trade and investment vis a vis other external actors such as Russia, Turkey and China. However, this is not guaranteed to last, particularly in the case of China, which is set to increase its economic presence in the Western Balkans in the coming years as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI will help with much-needed infrastructure upgrading in the Western Balkans, but also creates several potential risks which should be closely monitored.

Other barriers on the road to accession

Even if the Western Balkans takes a great leap forward towards the EU, there are other barriers in the way which could also hold back accession. These include less enthusiasm for accession in Western Europe, potential interference by third parties, and conflicts between Western Balkan states and current EU members. We are cautiously optimistic about a solution to the Greece-Macedonia name dispute, but the Spanish position on Kosovo, for example, looks like a major obstacle.

It is easy to be negative

The 2025 target represents a highly ambitious best-case scenario, and clearly for some countries in the region it is not going to happen. Nevertheless, such a target could, and should, serve as a powerful incentive for governments in the Western Balkans to speed up their reform agendas. Although the chances are probably well below 50%, we do not completely rule out at least Montenegro and Serbia joining the bloc by 2025 or shortly thereafter.

To access the full publication, click [here](#).

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