

Roundtable: “Resetting Enlargement: A New Approach towards the Western Balkans” Belgrade Security Conference 2025 | 19 November

Europe Plus (E+) hosted the roundtable “*Resetting Enlargement: A New Approach towards the Western Balkans*” during the Belgrade Security Conference 2025, emphasizing a clear message: the Western Balkans do not lack ambition — they lack pace. The discussion examined the current state of the EU enlargement process, the gap between geopolitical urgency and domestic reform progress, and the need for tangible benefits for citizens. While public support for EU membership remains strong, slow and uneven reforms have created frustration.

Key Takeaways

- The current enlargement model is too slow for today’s geopolitical realities, making faster, results-driven EU steps essential.
- The Growth Plan offers tools for gradual or accelerated integration, but its link to the accession process remains unclear, risking further reform fatigue in the region.
- The financial gap between pre-accession support and post-accession EU funding highlights the transformative impact of full membership; the Western Balkans should be seen as a strategic investment, not a cost.
- Enlargement today functions primarily as a security project, yet limited public understanding of its economic benefits and a decade of perceived EU containment undermine reform momentum.
- Post-accession monitoring is acceptable, but anything less than full membership or restricted voting rights would be unjust once obligations are met.

Panel Highlights

The roundtable, moderated by **Majlinda Bregu**, Chair of the Strategic Committee at Europe Plus (E+), brought together leading experts:

- **Tanja Mišćević**, Professor at the University of Belgrade and former Minister for European Integration, highlighted that the traditional enlargement model is too slow for today’s geopolitical realities. While the EU pursues measures delivering quick, tangible results—including gradual or accelerated integration and the Growth Plan—enlargement fatigue in the EU has generated reform fatigue in the region, making it crucial to accelerate reforms and link them clearly to full membership.
- **Fatmir Besimi**, Founder and CEO of Strategers and former Minister of Finance of North Macedonia, emphasized that Western Balkan membership should not be seen as a cost. Comparing IPA funds (€150 per capita) with structural and cohesion funds in new member states (~€3,000 per capita), he underscored the transformative impact of full EU accession and stressed that the region represents a strategic and economic asset.
- **Agon Maliqi**, Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council, framed EU enlargement primarily as a security project, emphasizing that security dynamics in the Western Balkans and Europe have shifted since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, reinforcing the strategic importance of integration. Maliqi also noted that after a decade of EU skepticism, a new window of opportunity has emerged, yet domestic awareness of the economic benefits of

accession remains limited, emphasizing the need for stronger engagement with reform-oriented actors.

- **Biljana Papović**, State Secretary at the Ministry of European Affairs of Montenegro, showcased Montenegro's progress, highlighting that enlargement retains transformative power and delivers tangible benefits. Alignment with EU standards requires sustained member state support, and while post-accession monitoring is acceptable, anything less than full membership would be unjust once obligations are met.

The discussion reinforced that the credibility of the enlargement process depends on aligning political commitment, financial resources, and consistent reform delivery. Ensuring measurable progress is key to sustaining trust and advancing the Western Balkans on their European integration path. The roundtable reaffirmed Europe Plus (E+)'s commitment to promoting a credible, forward-looking enlargement agenda for the region.