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Western Balkans at Munich Security Conference 2025: A New Geopolitical Chapter

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The 2025 Munich Security Conference (MSC) brought renewed urgency to the Western Balkans’ European integration ambitions. As war in Ukraine reshapes Europe’s security architecture, regional leaders sought to solidify their pathway to the European Union while resisting external pressures and internal divisions. With the goal of joining the European Union by 2030 on the horizon, the conference provided a sobering yet strategic assessment of what must be done to bridge the gap between promise and reality.

At stake was more than just EU membership; this was about the geopolitical fate of a region that has long been a battleground for competing interests, from Brussels to Beijing to Moscow. Over three days of critical discussions, the Western Balkans' future was scrutinized through the lenses of security, economic integration, and youth empowerment.

The EU Accession Dilemma: Between Optimism and Scepticism

Few issues dominated MSC discussions as much as the question of EU enlargement. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen set the tone early, reiterating the EU's commitment to welcoming the Western Balkans into its fold.

“Their integration is not merely a geopolitical necessity but a moral imperative,” she declared, underscoring how Russia's aggression in Ukraine has refocused Brussels' attention on stabilizing its periphery.

Montenegro and Serbia remain the frontrunners in the accession process. Montenegro has made significant strides, with 30 out of 35 negotiation chapters completed, though hurdles remain in competition policy and environmental standards. Serbia, despite progress in economic reforms, faces persistent criticism for its reluctance to align with EU sanctions against Russia.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz echoed a broader EU sentiment: “The Western Balkans' EU future hinges on regional cooperation, not isolated progress.” This approach aligns with the Berlin Process, which has sought to harmonize trade, infrastructure, and dispute resolution efforts for over a decade.

A significant diplomatic advancement took place at MSC when five of six regional agreements were finalized, including provisions to ease Serbian exports to Kosovo; an issue long mired in political deadlock. However, unresolved disputes, such as North Macedonia's stalled constitutional reforms and Bosnia and Herzegovina's entrenched political divisions, serve as clear indicators that accession remains a difficult challenge.



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Economic Integration: Opportunities and Challenges

The Western Balkans' economic interdependence with the EU is both an opportunity and a challenge. The EU accounts for 68% of the region's trade and 74% of its foreign direct investment, facilitated by Stabilization and Association Agreements and the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). Yet, disparities in industrial competitiveness and infrastructure connectivity persist.

The European Commission's "Global Gateway" initiative, which has allocated €9 billion for transport and energy projects in the Western Balkans by 2030, is seen as a game-changer in strengthening the region's connectivity and economic resilience. Better connected transportation networks; such as the Mediterranean and Baltic-Adriatic routes, are expected to cut travel times by 30%, enhance logistics efficiency, and foster regional trade. Additionally, investment in sustainable energy sources, including solar and wind projects, aims to reduce reliance on fossil fuels and modernize power grids to align with EU standards.

Yet, these promising developments face stiff competition from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has invested over €8 billion in infrastructure projects across the Western Balkans. Montenegro's Bar-Boljare highway, financed through Chinese loans, has become a cautionary tale of debt dependency, with repayment concerns prompting intervention from European lenders. Meanwhile, Bosnia's expansion of coal power plants under BRI funding raises environmental concerns, potentially clashing with EU climate regulations. Kaja Kallas, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has raised concerns about the increasing economic influence of external actors in the Western Balkans. She emphasized the need for the EU to counter "non-transparent investment strategies that may compromise

national sovereignty and long-term economic stability." As China continues to expand its presence in the region through infrastructure investments, the EU is accelerating its efforts to provide alternative funding based on transparency, regulatory alignment, and sustainability, ensuring that economic growth does not come at the cost of political leverage or financial instability.

Youth Engagement: A Turning Point for Regional Development

A defining issue at MSC 2025 was the role of youth in shaping the future of the Western Balkans. The region faces a stark demographic challenge; since 2010, 40% of its skilled workforce has left, draining local economies and intensifying political stagnation. The conference discussions made it clear: youth engagement is not just a policy issue but a strategic necessity for regional stability.

To address the crisis, innovative approaches were unveiled, including the "Western Balkans Digital Nomad Visa" program, designed to attract remote workers through tax incentives and co-working hubs. Meanwhile, the EU's "Youth Guarantee Plus" initiative aims to provide 250,000 job placements by 2027 in sectors such as renewable energy, information technology, and sustainable manufacturing, ensuring that young professionals find viable career opportunities within their home countries.

However, these initiatives alone cannot reverse the exodus of young talent. As Edin Koljenović, Head of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), asserted, "Youth must be at the core of EU integration; not just as recipients of policy but as architects of regional transformation."

This sentiment was reinforced by youth-driven movements that made a strong impact at MSC. The Berlin Process Youth Forum, a key initiative under the Berlin Process, was held alongside the Munich Security Conference. It gathered over 100 youth delegates from across the Western Balkans to discuss critical regional issues and propose tangible policy solutions. The forum emphasized the need for structural changes, including mandatory youth representation in national parliaments and targeted funding for emerging entrepreneurs, ensuring that young voices play a decisive role in the region's future. Civil society initiatives, such as Albania's "EU Ambassadors" program, which educates rural populations on EU integration, and cross-border reconciliation projects like the "Rock the Balkans" festival, were highlighted as powerful tools for fostering unity and long-term engagement.

The message from MSC was clear: reversing brain drain requires more than economic incentives; it demands a cultural shift where young people see a future worth investing in within their own countries. If the EU and regional governments fail to act decisively, they risk not

only losing their next generation of leaders but also compromising the long-term stability of the Western Balkans.



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Security Challenges: Internal and External Threats

Security in the Western Balkans remains sensitive, susceptible to both external influence and internal tensions. With the war in Ukraine casting a long shadow, NATO's role in the region was a focal point at MSC. A dedicated session, "From Powder Keg to a Secure Link: How Western Balkans Contribute to a Secure and Resilient Europe," emphasized the region's transition from instability to a strategic pillar of European security. NATO reaffirmed its commitment to strengthening military cooperation, increasing joint exercises, and supporting local defence institutions.

Kosovo's plans to transition its Security Force into a formal army by 2028 drew both support and concern. Prime Minister Albin Kurti defended the move as necessary against potential security concerns involving Serbia, but Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić warned it could escalate regional tensions.

Another major topic was emerging security threats, including cyber warfare and disinformation. The EU-backed proposal to establish a Regional Hybrid Threat Analysis Center; designed to combat disinformation, cyberattacks, and non-state actor interference, was widely endorsed. Discussions at MSC 2025 also examined the broader challenges of information security and foreign interference in the Western Balkans. Experts pointed to the rising use of digital platforms to spread misleading narratives that could inflame ethnic tensions and undermine regional stability. The conference emphasized the need for coordinated EU-Western Balkans efforts in media literacy, fact-checking networks, and cyber resilience.

programs to counter these threats effectively. MSC also hosted discussions on countering foreign interference, emphasizing the need for intelligence-sharing and coordinated cyber defence strategies.

Energy security was another critical issue. The MSC endorsed the EU's Energy Security Initiative, which aims to integrate Western Balkan power grids with the European Network of Transmission System Operators (ENTSO-E) by 2027, reducing dependency on Russian gas imports. The initiative includes plans to modernize infrastructure, promote regional energy cooperation, and diversify supply sources to enhance stability and independence.

The Road Ahead: A Test for Europe

The next five years will be pivotal in determining the Western Balkans' trajectory toward European integration and regional stability. Success hinges on the European Union's ability to translate its commitments into actionable policies, ensuring that financial aid and investment packages lead to measurable improvements in governance, infrastructure, and institutional resilience. Regional leaders, in turn, must demonstrate unwavering political will to implement necessary reforms, curb corruption, and strengthen democratic institutions.

Furthermore, security concerns remain a major obstacle. MSC 2025 discussions highlighted the need for deeper NATO-EU cooperation in the region, with proposals for expanded security guarantees and intelligence-sharing to address emerging threats. The creation of cross-border crisis response teams and enhanced cyber defence strategies were emphasized as necessary steps to mitigate vulnerabilities.

Economic resilience is another crucial factor. The EU's Global Gateway initiative is a significant step in modernizing the region's infrastructure, but without targeted support for education, innovation, and youth employment, brain drain will continue to hinder long-term development. Strengthening regional cooperation mechanisms, particularly through CEFTA and energy integration efforts, will be essential in fostering economic self-sufficiency and reducing reliance on external actors.

If these challenges are not managed effectively, the Western Balkans risk remaining in a geopolitical limbo, susceptible to external influence rather than emerging as a fully integrated and stable part of the European community. The decisions made in the coming years will not only shape the future of the region but will also test the EU's ability to uphold its strategic vision and commitments.

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