

MOVING TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE GREEN AGENDA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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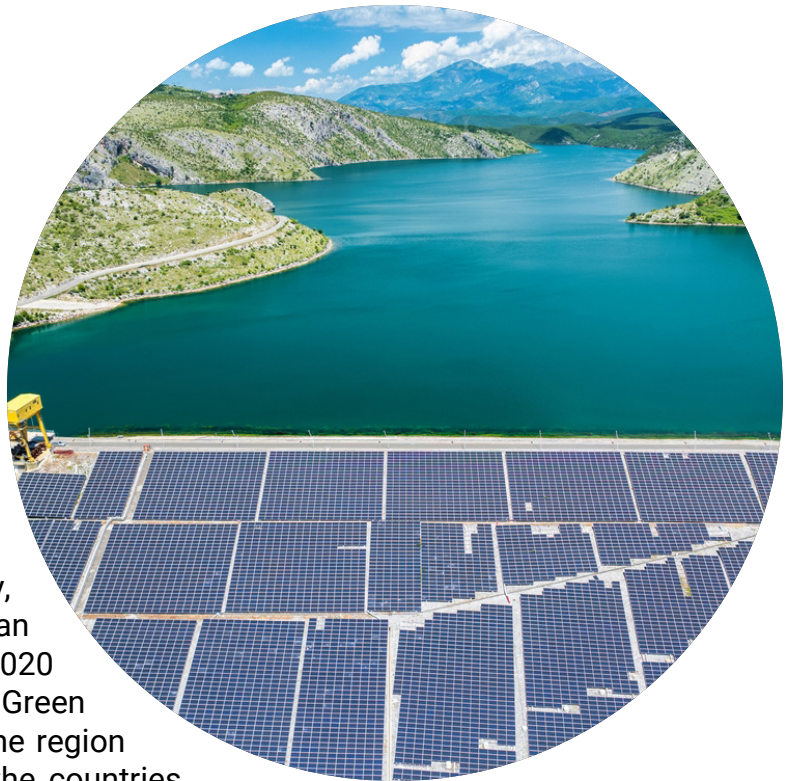
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# MOVING TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE GREEN AGENDA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS



## ABSTRACT

This policy brief examines the attempts of the Western Balkans (WB) to transition from a carbon-based to a carbon-free economy, highlighting the role in this of the European Union's (EU) Green Agenda. Introduced in 2020 as part of the EU's broader Green Deal, the Green Agenda provides a framework for aligning the region with EU environmental goals, even though the countries of the WB are not themselves EU members. The brief explores how the Green Agenda contributes to the WB's integration in the Union through environmental reforms and the alignment of the region's economic and institutional systems with EU standards. Progress has been made in the WB in adopting renewable energy sources, climate adaptation strategies and legislative changes, but significant challenges remain. These include coal dependency, inadequate waste and water management, air pollution and energy poverty. This brief identifies areas for improvement, stressing the need to implement a more inclusive approach and to foster multilevel governance in the pursuit of enhanced transparency and accountability. Additionally, it emphasises the importance of addressing the transition fatigue that may be a consequence of pursuing EU accession. The analysis concludes by offering policy recommendations for strengthening the implementation of the Green Agenda and for ensuring that the region's transition to sustainability is fair, equitable and aligned with EU integration goals.

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## Introduction

Like the European Union (EU) member states, the countries of the Western Balkans (WB) are experiencing the effects of multiple crises. Climate change, technological revolution and energy crises are straining existing governance structures and creating unpredictable consequences. A response to these, if it is to be successful, necessitates a profound redefinition of the economic, social and institutional systems prevailing in the WB. If the simultaneous transition challenges are not addressed in a manner that is equal, fair and just, the WB will be vulnerable to further instability. Since 2019, the EU has actively promoted the European Green Deal as a multi-annual political framework to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. Through this initiative, the EU defines targets and supports countries and territories in managing the transition fatigue they face.<sup>1</sup> The European ambition to enact a green transition also extends to candidate countries, such as the WB, with the goal of accelerating their convergence with the EU.

To assist the WB countries in transitioning from a carbon-based to a carbon-free economy, the EU introduced in 2020 the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (the Agenda),<sup>2</sup> also known as the Sofia Declaration; this was followed by the Action Plan announced at the EU–Western Balkans Summit in Brdo pri Kranju (Slovenia) in 2021. The Agenda is built on five key pillars: (1) climate action, including decarbonisation, energy and mobility; (2) a circular economy, focusing on waste, recycling, sustainable production and resource efficiency; (3) biodiversity, aimed at protecting and restoring the region's natural assets; (4) reduction of air, water and air pollution; and (5) sustainable food systems and rural development. A cross-cutting topic, digitalisation, serves as a key enabler for these pillars, aligning with the

concept of a transition that is both green and digital. The Action Plan outlines a framework to coordinate, support and monitor the effective implementation of the Agenda. The current Action Plan consists of 58 detailed actions, organised into seven components, and requires annual monitoring and assessment to ensure that it is being properly implemented. Updates are scheduled for 2027.

In terms of the financial costs of the transition, the implementation of the Agenda is supported through existing EU funds, including a combination of funds deriving from different funding schemes, such as the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance and the Western Balkans Investment Framework, as well as ad hoc funding programmes. In particular, the EU has activated a dedicated financial instrument, the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans 2021–2027, which allocates up to €9 billion in EU funds and could mobilise up to €20 billion in investments through the Western Balkans Guarantee Facility. Since 2021, the European Commission has committed €1.25 billion to support the implementation of the Green Agenda, including technical assistance and investments to promote energy efficiency, renewable energy, the transition from coal and improved environmental management.<sup>3</sup> The intention to alleviate transition fatigue in the WB was confirmed last July by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who said: "Our €30 billion Investment Plan for the Western Balkans is delivering, with this new €1.2 billion package. It strengthens regional connections with quality infrastructure and brings us closer together, which is our ultimate goal."<sup>4</sup>

Overall, these initiatives reflect the recognition that the region faces significant environmental and economic challenges. It remains heavily reliant on coal, struggles with high pollution levels and is burdened by outdated

infrastructure. At the same time, the countries of the WB are committed to aligning with the EU and are therefore required to meet EU environmental standards, including those set out in the European Green Deal. These concurrent challenges, intensified by the profound economic and social transformation that the EU is currently undergoing, mean that the region will need to intensify its attempts to align with the bloc.

This brief explores how the Agenda fits into the broader context of EU enlargement, analyses the progress made so far and identifies areas for improvement. It closes by offering policy recommendations pointing to potential future directions for action.

### **How the Green Agenda contributes to the integration of the WB into the EU**

According to the renewed enlargement methodology adopted by the EU in 2020,<sup>5</sup> Cluster 4, "Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity", includes Chapter 27, "Environment and Climate Change", which focuses on supporting the alignment of candidate countries with EU standards. As part of their accession process, candidate countries are expected to align with the EU's environmental objectives in several fields: air quality, waste management, water quality, the protection of the natural world, industrial pollution control, chemicals, noise, climate change and the protection of civil society. The adaptation process involves over 200 EU legal acts.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, Chapter 27 is one of the most demanding in the EU accession process in terms of the funds and institutional capacities required; it further requires profound changes in the habits of citizens and industries. The chapter therefore necessitates more than simply conforming to the existing legislative framework: there must be a broader strategic approach where alignment runs in parallel with



*The Green Agenda offers a more politically oriented approach in which countries can incorporate their strategies into a shared framework under the EU's auspices.*



the implementation of a clear and transparent regional strategy.

The Green Agenda offers a more politically oriented approach in which countries can incorporate their strategies into a shared framework under the EU's auspices. In this regard, the Agenda is closely tied to the region's EU accession ambitions. Indeed, environmental reforms are a key part of the *acquis communautaire*, and aligning with EU environmental standards is essential for the region's progress towards membership.<sup>7</sup> This dual role has been acknowledged by the European Commission: the Agenda not only provides a framework for the WB to meet the EU's environmental and climate objectives but is also a crucial element in the broader enlargement process.<sup>8</sup> In its opinion, the transition to a green economy could strengthen the region's integration into the EU by demonstrating the commitment of candidate countries to sustainable development and economic modernisation.

### **Progress so far: towards the implementation of the Agenda**

According to the Agenda's first Implementation Report (2022), provided by the Regional Cooperation Council,<sup>9</sup> countries are implementing the priorities of the Agenda and its Action Plan to an only limited extent. There is a restricted timeframe available for implementation and there does not seem to have been fully effective








monitoring of the improvements made by each country. However, the Report confirms a general tendency on the part of all countries to conform to the Agenda and to support its implementation. In all cases, the Agenda implementation process is gradual and incremental, and its effects on the economy and society are not yet visible.<sup>10</sup> That said, the report recognises some measurable improvements in several fields. For instance, five of the six national economies in the region have adopted or are adopting a law addressing climate issues,<sup>11</sup> while all of them have set forward-looking energy and climate targets (in Nationally Determined Contributions, government strategies or other relevant documents).

Some countries, such as North Macedonia and Albania, have made notable strides in

expanding renewable energy, particularly hydropower and solar energy.<sup>12</sup> Although it is a controversial case when it comes to analysing the environmental impacts, Albania, in particular, generates a significant portion of its electricity from renewable sources (mainly hydropower) and has begun exploring other renewable technologies.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, North Macedonia has introduced legislative measures to promote investments in solar energy, contributing to its goals of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The whole region is committed to reducing such emissions through the Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Agreement.

Despite these improvements, however, the energy market in the WB remains relatively isolated from the EU and suffers from price

**Figure 1.** State of national energy and climate plans preparation

|                        | Legal basis adopted<br> | Working group operational<br> | Modelling capacity exists<br> | Policy section (A) drafted<br> | Analytical section (B) drafted<br> | Submitted to the Secretariat for peer review<br> | Final version submitted to the Secretariat<br> |
|------------------------|--|--|--|--|---|---|---|
| Albania                | ●  | ●  | ●  | ●  | ●   | ●   | ●   |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | ○  | ●  | ●  | ●  | ●   | ●   | ○   |
| Georgia                | ●  | ●  | ●  | ●  | ●   | ●   | ○   |
| Kosovo                 | ●  | ●  | ●  | ●  | ●   | ○   | ○   |
| Moldova                | ○  | ●  | ●  | ●  | ●   | ○   | ○   |
| Montenegro             | ●  | ●  | ●  | ●  | ●   | ●   | ○   |
| North Macedonia        | ●  | ●  | ●  | ●  | ●   | ●   | ●   |
| Serbia                 | ●  | ●  | ●  | ○  | ●   | ○   | ○   |

● Finished     
 ● Started     
 ○ Planned

**Source:** "Green Agenda for the Western Balkans Action Plan: Implementation report 2022". Regional Cooperation Council, 20 October 2023. <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/162/green-agenda-for-the-western-balkans-action-plan-implementation-report-2022>

fluctuations. This has been particularly problematic since the start of the war in Ukraine, which prompted North Macedonia to declare a "state energy crisis".<sup>14</sup> Across the WB, coal-fuelled thermal power plants remain the primary energy source. Around 70% of domestic electricity production in the region is based on lignite. Provision and supply challenges have increased energy poverty in the WB, with households often spending more than 10% of their income on energy.<sup>15</sup> It is estimated that up to 40% of the regional population may suffer from energy poverty, compared with 10% in the EU.<sup>16</sup> Energy prices are a source of political tension and have already inspired protests in several countries.

To redefine their climate targets and procedures, the countries of the WB are developing and implementing integrated energy and climate plans (Figure 1). In addition, the whole region is preparing and putting in place climate adaptation strategies, introducing solutions that respect the natural world and supporting various initiatives to adopt a more sustainable approach. However, even though the legislative and regulatory frameworks are steadily evolving, their implementation remains a significant challenge. The varying stages of EU integration, along with the differing economic structures of these countries, create a distinct transition path for each nation. In consequence, the implementation of the Agenda and its Action Plan is complex and inconsistent across the region, especially when compared with the situation in EU member states.

### Areas of improvement

Although progress has not been uniform across the region, the commitment of the WB as a whole signals a relatively strong intention to align with broader EU climate goals. But further work still need to be done. For instance, the WB's

water and waste management systems are inadequate or are not being managed properly.<sup>17</sup> Untreated wastewater is frequently discharged into rivers, and illegal waste dumping is a widespread problem.<sup>18</sup> For example, the River Drina is heavily polluted by industrial waste, and the region's waste recycling rates fall far below EU standards. The absence of modern waste management infrastructure remains a critical issue, one that requires substantial investment if it is to be rectified. Greater efforts are needed to modernise wastewater treatment facilities; and sustainable waste management practices, such as recycling and waste-to-energy projects, need to be introduced.

In addition to challenges in water and waste management, one of the most pressing concerns is air pollution, particularly in capital cities and their surrounding metropolitan areas; examples of this include Sarajevo, Skopje and Belgrade.<sup>19</sup> These cities often experience air quality levels that breach EU safety limits due to the widespread use of coal for energy and heating, outdated industrial facilities and high vehicular emissions.<sup>20</sup> The reliance on coal-fired power plants, particularly in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, contributes significantly to poor air quality, resulting in a high incidence of respiratory diseases and premature deaths across the region.<sup>21</sup> According to the World Bank, Serbia topped a list of death rates from pollution among European countries; it was placed ninth overall on the global list, higher than India.<sup>22</sup> In the light of the adoption, implementation and enforcement of Chapter 27, a study published by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission in 2020 affirmed that reducing the emissions of air pollutants and greenhouse gases is a priority for the WB;<sup>23</sup> however, the alignment with the EU's *acquis* on environment and climate in the region is at an early stage.

Energy poverty is another critical issue in the WB. Programmes to address this, along with financing schemes for household renovations and ensuring basic living standards, are in the initial stages of development. This is the case despite the Tirana Declaration's focus on the EU's new Energy Support Package, which includes €1 billion to support vulnerable families and small and medium-sized enterprises, and to foster the region's energy transition and independence.<sup>24</sup> As already noted, many households currently spend a large portion of their income on energy; the transition to renewable energy could exacerbate this problem if it is not managed carefully. It is crucial to ensure that energy prices remain affordable during the transition; otherwise, social inequality could be deepened further.<sup>25</sup> As became apparent with the energy crises worsened by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, energy provision has become a geopolitical issue, and some countries in the WB are reluctant to align their energy systems and infrastructure to EU standards. In this respect, Serbia's ambivalence is confirmed by data showing that, from 2009 to 2019, the country had an average dependency of 74% on gas imports from Russia. Although Serbia has opened Chapter 15, "Energy", to modernise its energy sector as part of the EU integration process, it continues to receive natural gas from Russia at a discounted rate; this is transported via the Black Sea, Turkey and Bulgaria, bypassing Ukraine.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, the region's vulnerability to climate change is growing, with more frequent and severe weather events such as floods and droughts. The devastating floods of 2014, which caused extensive damage in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, highlighted the region's lack of resilience to climate-related disasters. Extreme events are becoming more frequent and intense; there were further floods and landslides that hit Bosnia and Herzegovina in October 2024, causing damage to infrastructure and loss of



*One significant problem is that the dual challenges of transition fatigue and EU integration may reinforce each other.*



human life. So far, these events have caused billions of euros in damage and displaced thousands of people. For instance, agriculture, a critical sector for many regional economies, is at risk due to shifting weather patterns and reduced water availability. Unless appropriate measures are taken and risk management for water resources and agriculture is improved, there will be a further decrease in precipitation and an increase of 20% in dry days.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusions

The WB is striving to adopt a more sustainable approach in transitioning from a carbon-based to a carbon-free society. These attempts are primarily being pursued through the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans under the supervision of the EU. However, significant challenges persist, particularly in reducing coal dependency, improving waste and water management and addressing energy poverty. At the same time, the EU integration process requires a series of structural reforms, demanding additional work to meet EU standards.

One significant problem is that the dual challenges of transition fatigue and EU integration may reinforce each other. They can be resolved, but only with intense, unwavering political commitment. This commitment was reaffirmed in the Hamburg Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB), signed in Germany on 8 October 2024. The countries of the WB declared their "commitment

to the full and timely implementation of the GAWB and its Action Plan 2021–2030, recognising the need for acceleration, cross-sectoral collaboration, and multi-level governance". As a result, the WB is expected to adopt a Regional Adaptation Strategy by 2026; this could serve as a key reference for the ongoing transition process.

While recognising the significant work being carried out by regional actors, the EU and individual countries, the Agenda and its Action Plan could be strengthened by further action, specifically:

- **Adopting a more inclusive and less technocratic approach.** The implementation and monitoring of the Agenda have often been seen as overly self-referential. The role of the Regional Cooperation Council in facilitating and overseeing the Agenda's progress has faced criticism. One potential solution could be to outsource the monitoring phase to regional research centres, universities and

non-governmental organisations. This would help foster more transparent and meaningful participation from civil society, local communities, businesses and youth.

- **Applying an experimental multilevel perspective to defining priorities and strategies.** As the Hamburg Declaration acknowledges, the Agenda requires a collaborative effort involving local governments, the private sector, civil society and citizens. This principle should be reflected in practice through the various reforms that countries are introducing to implement the Agenda. Strengthening governance and institutional capacity will be crucial to overcoming the challenges ahead.

In conclusion, the dual challenge that the WB faces must be approached synergistically if it is not to result in mere overlap. The key question is whether the WB's "green integration" can serve as a model to be applied to the broader integration process (that is, to the other clusters and chapters) or if it will remain simply an isolated and poorly coordinated ambition.

## Endnotes

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## About the author



### ERBLIN BERISHA

Erblin Berisha is Assistant Professor at the Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning at Politecnico di Torino. His research focuses on the evolution of spatial planning systems and territorial governance in the Western Balkans region in the light of international influence. He is also interested in understanding the impact of just green transitions in the Western Balkans. He is the editor (with Giancarlo Cotella and Alys Solly) of *Governing Territorial Development in the Western Balkans: Challenges and Prospects of Regional Cooperation* (Springer, 2021).

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## POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE EU AND THE CHALLENGES OF ENLARGEMENT



**ABSTRACT**

Today, enlargement policy is not a base for building electoral consent for any European party – quite the opposite. It is also a highly technical field where political propaganda can easily manipulate public opinion. Strong fears around new races to the bottom in the sphere of democracy and labour relations around competition for scarce resources or migration is a strategy for gaining votes in most EU countries. Yet, given the EU member states' role in the decision-making around enlargement, the role of national political parties in this policy can be crucial. This policy brief is an enquiry into European national political parties' positions on EU enlargement. It was compiled by gathering information from party programmes, parliamentary debates, news media and think-tank sources. In addition, it relies on interviews with a number of experts and journalists with specific subject matter expertise. It covers selected (non-social democratic) political parties in 13 of 27 member states, chosen on the basis of their relevance to the enlargement process.

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## HOW TO ENSURE A JUST TRANSITION IN TIMES OF INDUSTRIAL TRANSFORMATION

**POLICY PROPOSALS FOR THE EU JUST TRANSITION AGENDA**



**ABSTRACT**

If climate policies do not also consider socio-economic inequalities, implementing them will be much harder. While the EU's just transition agenda is a welcome step in this direction, this policy brief highlights several areas for improvement. Monitoring Committees play a central role in ensuring the transparent and inclusive deployment of the Just Transition Fund, but they suffer from limitations, such as a lack of representation and technical expertise, which would call for further capacity building and increased stakeholder participation. The focus of just transition funding on preserving jobs in transitioning industries raises concerns about support for other vulnerable groups and the pace of funding, highlighting the need for measures to stem brain drain, extend funding duration and streamline access. This is especially relevant to enhance the transformative potential of just transition funding.

**The proposal for a European socio-ecological welfare model aims to prevent welfare state erosion amid environmental crises by aligning with the European Pillar of Social Rights and integrating social and environmental goals. Efforts to institutionalise the just transition within the European Commission's workplan require increased involvement of decisionmakers, recognition of local contributions, and integration of long-term vision and communication strategies to fight disaffection.**

While the just transition movement is composed of a variety of actors, such actors often come with diverging views. Building trust and substantive dialogue among actors, highlighting the importance of understanding local realities and identifying common ground can go a long way in advancing a coherent and more impactful agenda.

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## A POSITIVE NARRATIVE FOR A JUST TRANSITION

AN APPROACH TO A MORE PEOPLE-CENTRED COMMUNICATION

Inanna Tribukait, Kevin Le Merle

**solidar**

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## EXTERNAL INFLUENCES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: WHERE ARE WE AT?



**ABSTRACT**

Alongside the EU accession path, other third countries have managed to create the conditions to expand their spheres of influence to the Western Balkans. Ethnic fragmentation, weak economic conditions and widespread cases of corruption created fertile soil for non-EU-aligned actors to enter regional dynamics and attempt to fill regional power vacuums. Multiple strategies have been adopted. These go from the use of diplomacy to direct financial investments from promoting cultural adherence to establishing forms of economic dependence. The main actors involved in the process are Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf States, all using different tools and capacities to pursue their objectives. The EU complex principles of conditionality and long negotiation processes have worsened the institutional and motivational obstacles to pursuing a smooth European path. Nevertheless, the conflict in Ukraine and the most recent global developments, have led the EU to overcome political and institutional minutiae to work on reaching its main regional interests: security and stability. This paper focuses on the presence of external actors in the Western Balkan region, the interests and ambitions behind their manoeuvres and the direct consequences for the European Union.

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## LABOUR MIGRATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

**CONSEQUENCES FOR THE REGION'S DEMOCRATIC LIFE**



**ABSTRACT**

Labour migration is a phenomenon that is rooted in the structural problems of Western Balkans societies, such as the high rate of youth unemployment, a poorly performing labour market and inadequate welfare systems.

The phenomenon has severe repercussions not only on the quality of internal services, such as healthcare and highly qualified jobs, but also on the democratic stability of the countries analysed.

This policy brief provides an overview of the causes and consequences of labour migration from the Western Balkans, concluding with recommendations for the region's national governments and for the European institutions on how to jointly address the problem.

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## BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

HOW TO BUILD A VIABLE ROAD TO EU MEMBERSHIP



**ABSTRACT**

Since its beginning with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2005, Bosnia-Herzegovina's EU path has been marred by the country's unwillingness to gather the necessary political consensus to adopt the reforms needed to improve its functionality, its rule of law and its democratic standards. This feature has proved itself true throughout BiH's EU journey. The limits of conditionality have been overcome by Brussels and the member states' several decisions to lower the bar and allow Sarajevo to go further. The 2022 decision by the Commission and the Council to grant BiH the candidate status stems from almost purely geopolitical considerations, rather than from the effort of Bosnian institutions to reform. The same will most likely be true when, in March 2024, the Commission might recommend the Council for the opening of accession negotiations.

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