

## The Western Balkans as a Net-Contributor to the EU's Open Strategic Autonomy

*Outcomes of the EUI high-level policy dialogue “EU Open Strategic Autonomy and the Western Balkans”, organised in Ohrid, North Macedonia, on 19 October 2023.*

**Introduction.** The EU's Open Strategic Autonomy (OSA) represents the idea that the European Union should be able to act autonomously in a number of strategic policy areas, such as energy, health, or digital technologies. The idea was first introduced in 2013 in the context of security and defence policy. Yet what it would imply in practice has been a contested subject. At the European Council in Granada in October 2023, EU Member States discussed the OSA in view of a declaration outlining the EU's future strategic priorities.

The European University Institute (EUI), with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, organised and facilitated a timely exchange between Western Balkan and EU officials on what the EU's OSA means for the EU enlargement and the Western Balkans. The dialogue was attended by high-level policymakers from the host country North Macedonia, including the Vice Prime Minister for European Affairs Mr. Bojan Marichikj and the State Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mr. Filip Tosevski, as well as from all other Western Balkan countries.

**Key messages.** The participants concurred that the Western Balkans could become a net-contributor to the EU's OSA. For this reason, such contribution should be brought more closely into to the EU-Western Balkans debate. There is potential for enhanced strategic cooperation on matters of investment, trade, foreign and security policy, which could accelerate the accession process. A discussion on how the Western Balkans can make the EU more autonomous would be beneficial for enhancing the support for EU enlargement, both in EU Member States and in Western Balkan countries. It also presents an opportunity to decentralise the enlargement policy into other strategic areas of EU policy development.

**Recommendations.** Two concrete policy recommendations were highlighted in the event by the high-level participants:

1. **Systematic mapping of potential synergies.** The participants shared an interest in a mapping exercise that would identify areas in which the Western Balkans could contribute to the EU OSA. Some of the examples discussed were high-skilled ICT labour, and critical raw materials, building on existing mapping exercises of raw materials in the Western Balkan region. The EU and the Western Balkan countries could discuss signing similar strategic partnerships to ones that are currently being discussed with third countries as part of the Action Plan on Critical Raw Materials. Such partnerships could complement the existing Stabilisation and Association Agreements between the EU and Western Balkan countries and represent a win-win opportunity: through financing and assistance under the Global Gateway, they could support the development of sustainable and resilient value chains of critical raw materials, while creating innovation, research and quality local jobs.

Moreover, the concept of the EU OSA could provide an important gateway for opening up pathways for substantive integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU even before accession. This is especially relevant, because the structure of the OSA closely

corresponds to the different clusters in the revised enlargement methodology. Hence, a mapping exercise would not only serve to show where the Western Balkans could contribute to the OSA, but also how the OSA could be the catalyst for the best use of the existing EU legal and policy mechanisms to boost sectoral integration. To that end, a mapping exercise would provide the EU and the (potential) candidates with knowledge and tools on how to best use the OSA in the context of the revised enlargement methodology.

2. **Capacity-building in view of enhanced strategic cooperation.** Preparing the (potential) candidates for taking up the obligations of membership requires an investment in human capital across different dimensions of the public sector. In particular, it is essential to invest in those sectors that are relevant for enhancing the absorption of funds envisaged in the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. An enhanced capacity for management of EU funds is necessary for bridging the development gap between the EU Member States and the Western Balkans.

**Next steps.** The EUI will continue to support this discussion by organising additional high-level policy dialogues in the region in the near future. The aim for the next dialogue is to continue working on the recommendations outlined above. The participants of the dialogue agreed that this format adds great value by providing ample space to exchange views on current topics between all the relevant stakeholders.

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### **About the EUI**

The EUI was established in Florence by the founding EU member states in 1972 as a university with the status of an international organization. In 2017, the EUI established the School of Transnational Governance (STG) with a mission to develop current and future leaders, acting as a hub for training and innovation in public policy.

This event was organised in the context of the broader capacity building project for Western Balkan diplomats that the EUI is implementing with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. Through this project around 50 public officials of the region have been trained at the EUI in Florence on topics related to EU policymaking and diplomatic skills, with the aim of supporting the EU accession of the region and the widening initiative of the EUI towards the Western Balkan countries.

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