

EU accession ‘an opportunity for reform’ for Balkan cities and regions

EU reports show Western Balkan local and regional governments making steps forward

The possibility that Serbia and Montenegro could join the European Union in 2025, a conditional target date proposed by the European Commission, should encourage municipal and regional reform across the Western Balkans, speakers said on 4 May during the leading annual conference focused on the local and regional dimension of EU accession. The European Commission and the presidency of the Council of the EU were among those who, during the [Enlargement Day](#) conference organised by the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), emphasised that the success of the EU’s next enlargement will heavily depend on cities and regions.

[Karl-Heinz Lambertz](#) , the CoR’s President, said: “Future EU membership is a tangible reality for the Western Balkans but it needs political commitment from every level of government. Given that 70% of EU legislation is delivered by regions and cities, local and regional governments from candidate countries must be fully engaged throughout the EU accession process. The EU must help by establishing a Local Administration Facility that would help sub-national levels to work together with their EU peers. Well-established activities such as cross-border cooperation, macro-regional strategies, and networks such as the Covenant of Mayors, where cities and regions are improving energy efficiency and fighting climate challenges, should be bolstered to drive change.”

[Johannes Hahn](#) , the European Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy & Enlargement Negotiations, used the Enlargement Day conference – for the first time – to present this year’s EU’s latest reports on the progress made by candidate countries. The reports modest progress at the local and regional level. The Commission’s [appraisals](#) , published on 17 April, will serve as a basis for discussions at the [EU-Western Balkans summit](#) in Sofia on 17 May.

Commissioner Hahn said: “I am deeply convinced we will not be successful if all our efforts are not translated into concrete actions on the local and regional level. We will only stay on the surface if we deal only with the national level. What is necessary is to get on the ground. Local and regional governments play an important role as an anchor of stability, promoting socio-economic development and facilitating cross-border cooperation. Accession to the EU remains merit-based. One thing is not negotiable: quality comes before speed. Our partners know enlargement will only happen if it is a win-win situation for both sides.”

Lilyana Pavlova , Minister for the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU, presented the progress on the Presidency’s priority for European perspective of the Western Balkans and said: “The enlargement process

represents a strategic investment in the peace, democracy, prosperity, security and stability in Europe. Bulgaria recognises the high added value of being part of the EU, which has significantly contributed to the development and economic growth of the country, respectively the well-being of our citizens. I am glad that the Bulgarian Presidency has achieved one of our primary aims and that the European perspective for the Western Balkans is now high in the EU agenda, because Western Balkans is a region with high potential, economies in the region are growing fast, and deepening relations between the EU and the countries in the region is of mutual interest.”

Since 2006 the CoR has been working with local and regional authorities from [countries seeking EU membership](#) , developing structured work programmes with Serbia, Montenegro and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – through joint consultative committees – and less structured dialogues with other countries in the region and with Turkey. The Enlargement Day conference was preceded, on 3 May, by meetings of the joint consultative committees and working groups, each focused on a particular practical challenge identified by cities and regions in the would-be member states. These included [waste management](#) , [corruption](#) , the [digital transformation](#) , the [protection of cultural heritage](#) , and [city-to-city partnerships](#) .

Notes to editors :

- Keynote speakers at the conference were: [Johannes Hahn](#) , European Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy & Enlargement Negotiations; [Karl-Heinz Lambertz](#) , President of the CoR; [Lilyana Pavlova](#) , Minister for the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU; [Goran Svilanović](#) , Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council; and **Darko Fras**, President of the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe (NALAS). The [Regional Cooperation Council](#) , which was established in 2008, serves regional cooperation and European and Euro-Atlantic integration of South East Europe, focusing on removing obstacles to mobility, connectivity and competitiveness and on contributing to better governance, the rule of law and enhanced security. It has 46 partner countries and international organisations. [NALAS](#) brings together 14 associations, representing roughly 9,000 local authorities in Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Turkey.
- Experts who gave their appraisal of the state and future of the enlargement process at the conference on 4 May were: [Dušan Reljić](#) of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP); [Vessela Tcherneva](#) , of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR); [Erwan Fouéré](#) from the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS); and [Srđan Majstorović](#) , from the European Policy Centre (CEP) in Belgrade. A summary of the European Commission’s new [enlargement strategy](#) is available from the European Parliament’s research service.

- The CoR welcomed the European Union's plans for a deeper engagement with the Western Balkans in an [opinion adopted on 22 March](#) , but the EU's assembly for local and regional politicians stressed that the EU must make itself "stronger and more stable" before countries from the region can join the Union. The set of recommendations presented by the CoR and drafted by [Franz Schausberger](#) (AT/EPP), from the province of Salzburg, underscored that "regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations" should be "key prerequisites" for admission to the EU, specifically noting the "utmost importance" attached to migration and border management". The recommendations built on CoR opinions on the [value and implementation](#) of macro-regional strategies, ways of strengthening [cross-border cooperation](#) , and the EU's strategy for the [Adriatic and Ionian Region](#) .
- The CoR reviews the European Commission's annual [Enlargement Package](#) each year. The latest package, which was published on 17 April, will be assessed in a report drafted by [Franco Iacop](#) (IT/PES), who is currently the co-chair of the CoR's Joint Consultative Committee with Serbia. His opinion will be adopted in the CoR's plenary session in December, after debates at the commission level in July and September.

Photos are available on [Flickr](#) .