KCSS
Kosovar Centre for Security Studies

An Operational Integration Agenda for the Western Balkans to Facilitate Implementation of the Differentiated Model of Integration

January 14, 2026

Ramadan ILAZI and Jeta LOSHAJ

Ignita
Igniting Collaboration

OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS
WESTERN BALKANS

DISCLAIMER:

This report is produced by Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) in the framework of the IGNITA initiative, funded by Open Society Foundations—Western Balkans.

Views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the Open Society Foundations—Western Balkans

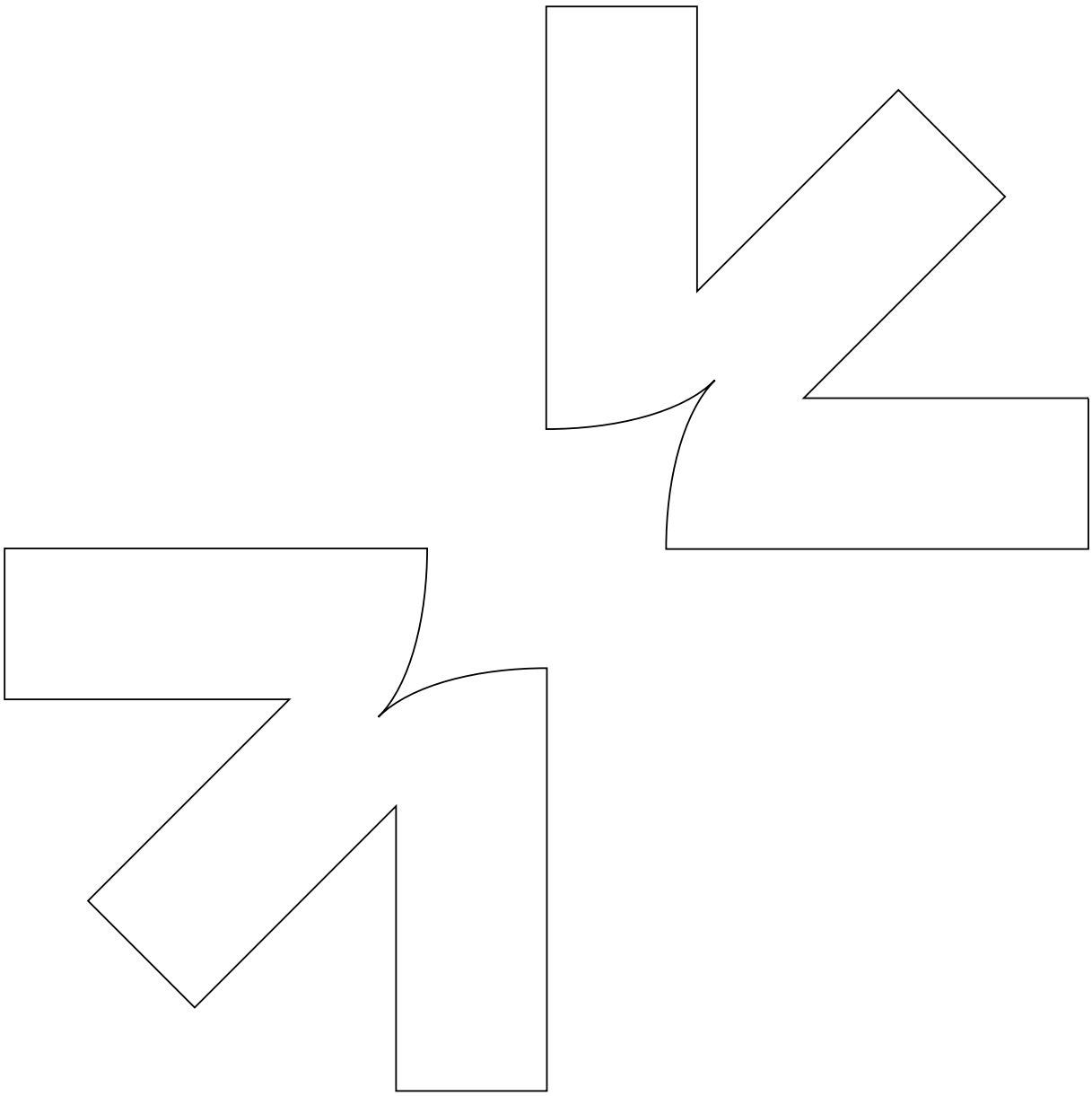


Table of Contents

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has prompted the European Union to re-evaluate and accelerate its enlargement policy, bringing renewed attention to the accession prospects of the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood countries of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The proposal by European Council President Charles Michel to target 2030 as a potential date for both the EU and candidate countries to be ready for enlargement has generated momentum, with support from EU institutions such as the European Parliament and the Commission. However, several member states remain cautious about expanding the Union, reflecting ongoing debates about the readiness of EU institutions to admit new member states and the political implications of further enlargement.

Progress and the pace of it among candidate countries is not equal. Albania, Montenegro, and Moldova have made some advances in aligning domestic legislation with the EU acquis and implementing key reforms, and are as such considered frontrunners. In contrast, countries such as Georgia and Serbia have experienced setbacks, particularly in areas related to democratic functioning of public institutions and the rule of law. On the EU's side, preparations for enlargement are still incomplete. Critical questions remain regarding institutional adaptation, such as the future size and composition of the European Parliament and the Commission, and the integration of new members into complex policy areas like the Common Agricultural Policy. Some leaders, including Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama, have expressed openness to differentiated membership models involving limited voting rights in EU institutions' decision-making, such as abstaining from veto powers.[1]

Against this backdrop, an independent Franco-German group of experts—known as the "Group of Twelve"—has published a comprehensive study on EU reforms in September 2023.[2] Their analysis underscores that the EU, in its current institutional and policy arrangement, is not prepared to absorb new members. The report advocates for a flexible, phased reform agenda and includes immediate measures that should be implemented before the next EU elections to enhance EU's internal functioning mainly

[1] Rama in Italy: Let's enter the EU even without voting rights, let the Italian European Commissioner represent us, https://www.voxnews.al/english/politike/rama-ne-itali-te-hyjme-ne-be-edhe-pa-te-drejte-vote-te-na-perfaqesoje-k-i104140

[2] Report by the independent Franco-German group of experts on EU reforms, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/france-and-europe/events-and-news-relating-to-france-s-european-policy/news/article/report-by-the-independent-franco-german-group-of-experts-on-eu-reforms

by simplifying decision-making of its institutions. It also recommends more substantial reforms, including potential treaty changes, for the 2024–2029 legislative cycle, already, an ambitious timeline considering it is 2026 and no steps have been taken in this direction.

With respect to enlargement, the report calls for a credible, merit-based process, setting 2030 as a target for both the EU and candidate countries to be ready for accession. It proposes a "regatta" approach—breaking down accession into smaller, manageable groups—and insists that adherence to the rule of law and fundamental values must remain non-negotiable. The report also supports the model of differentiated integration, envisioning a multi-tiered EU that allows for associate membership and flexible cooperation for countries not ready or willing to join fully. Ultimately, the authors warn that failure to reform and enlarge could expose the EU to deeper political crises, urging decisive action through both short-term and medium-term reforms.

It is within this context of differentiated integration that this policy memo proposes advancing "operational integration" for the Western Balkans (WB6) into the European Union (EU).

What is Operational Integration?

Operational integration is conceived as a largely security centric, pragmatic, and technical approach that outlines feasible steps (mostly "low-hanging fruits") to accelerate the integration of the WB6 in areas of mutual interest, such as cybersecurity, rule of law, investment security, malign foreign influence, etc. By focusing on practical cooperation, operational integration can deliver tangible benefits for both the EU and the Western Balkans, while supporting the broader objectives of enlargement and institutional integration. The goal of operational integration is three-fold: (1) To ensure that entire WB6 is becoming part of EU's institutional and policy system; (2) To increase political participation and inclusion in the EU's everyday workings; and (3) To facilitate and support the preparedness of WB6 countries' institutions to cope with obligations stemming from EU membership.

The EU's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, operationalised through the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans and Reform Agendas of each of the WB6, have

reopened the question of how to make gradual integration concrete. Implementation of reforms and financial incentives alone are insufficient if they are not matched by institutional participation. Operational integration fills this gap. It is facilitated by the European Commission as the guardian and professional assessor of achievement of EU law and European standards and compliance with them.

It offers visible progress without treaty change, relies on instruments already used with third countries, and aligns with the EU's own interest in extending the effective reach of its regulatory and security frameworks. To this end, the Growth Plan is designed to support each WB6 individually and the region as a whole in three major objectives, or pillars: (1) Enhancing the region's economic integration with the EU Single Market; (2) Boosting economic integration of the region through the Common Regional Market; (3) Accelerating fundamental reforms; and (4) Supporting convergence through increased financial assistance.[3] An example of such a component of the Growth Plan is integration into the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA).

The core argument for operational integration is simple: because the EU itself is a living political system that continuously needs to advance its laws and reform it institutions, the access of accession countries' institutions to these internal reform processes supports their own comprehensive reform processes required for EU membership. For the Western Balkans specifically, as Albania and Montenegro advance further along the accession track, the European Union needs a credible, practical offer for the remaining four countries. More critically for EU the prospects of the region as a whole, such an approach would support the EU's original political ambition and joint commitment with the WB6 – proclaimed at the Thessaloniki Summit when the Stabilisation and Association process for the Western Balkans was launched – for the integration of all the six countries into the EU at once, or "in package". This was also designed as a better incentive to support the resolution of bilateral open issues and the regional political and economic integration – both mandatory preconditions of the Copenhagen political criteria – "in a European spirit". Without such an offer to accelerate the full EU membership of all WB6 countries making such a perspective actually credible, the region risks fragmenting politically and institutionally and remains more open to the political and economic influence of other world powers such as Russia and China. All these factors, together and individually, undermine both the enlargement process and the EU's own security interests.

[3] Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/growth-plan-western-balkans_en.

Operational integration is neither an alternative to enlargement itself nor a shortcut around the acquis. It is a common-sense response to a structural gap in the current enlargement model, which lacks an additional mechanism for sustainable institutional adaptation of accession countries with EU member states, with a view to supporting institutional reforms in the latter. This is to say that while the lack of such a mechanism contributes to making the EU accession process progresses unevenly and membership timelines uncertain, it also contributes to making the day-to-day operational integration of the Western Balkans into the EU's security, rule of law, and economic-protection systems limited and less sustainable in the long run. This memo argues that gradual, merit-based participation in EU agencies and coordination mechanisms – through observer status, working arrangements, liaison roles, and structured information exchange – brings a much-needed added value, because it can deliver tangible benefits for both sides within the 2025–2027 timeframe, which is the timeframe of the Growth Plan.

Cyberattacks, hybrid threats, malign foreign influence, corrosive capital, strategic corruption increasingly exploit weak institutional interfaces between the EU and candidate countries. The Western Balkans sit directly at this interface. Leaving the region only partially plugged into EU systems creates vulnerabilities for the WB6 and blind spots for the EU. For the WB6, operational integration accelerates institutional learning, increases participation and representation in Brussels, embeds EU standards in daily practice, and offers citizens evidence that integration into the is not frozen and the EU membership prospect is not just a promise repeated in speeches of politicians at home and in Brussels but credible and actually possible. For the EU, it reduces security risks, enlarges and protects the Single Market, and reinforces the credibility of enlargement.

Operational integration means participation without membership as a transition towards full membership, using instruments the EU already applies to third countries. The following options are cumulative, merit-based, and reversible:

A. Formal cooperation arrangements / MoUs or international agreements: Formal cooperation agreements enabling structured engagement, information exchange, and participation in activities without governance rights.
B. National Liaison Officers / Contact Points: Designated officials embedded in EU coordination workflows, mirroring Member State practice.
C. Observer status (non-voting): Participation in boards, working groups, or coordination meetings, without decision-making power.

D. Access to secure information-sharing systems: Use of EU secure communication platforms for alerts, case coordination, and risk assessments.
E. Advancing participation in EU training, exercises, and simulations: Routine inclusion in EU-level drills, tabletop exercises, and professional training cycles.
F. Pilot participation / sandboxing: Time-bound pilots to test WB6 participation before scaling up (used frequently by EU agencies).
G. Joint reporting and data contribution: Structured input into EU monitoring, assessment, and early-warning systems.

Challenges and potential policy priority areas for operational integration

The debate on enlargement still gets trapped in a familiar frame: membership as the only meaningful endpoint, and everything before it as a holding pattern revolving around formal membership negotiations as the only politically legitimate reform process. That frame no longer matches how risks travel in Europe, or how closely the Western Balkans already intersect with EU interests in practice. The region is not waiting outside a sealed border; it is connected to the Union through trade, energy systems, labour mobility, digital infrastructure, financial flows, and security dynamics that move regardless of accession timetables. The costs of "partial until full membership" integration are no longer theoretical. They show up as weak links in supply chains, loopholes in enforcement, and gaps in coordination when crises hit.

That is why it makes sense to focus on a set of policy areas where both the EU's and accession countries' day-to-day resilience is shaped as much by operational routines as by laws on paper. Cybersecurity, investment screening, rule of law, judicial cooperation, fundamental rights, and information integrity are not "nice to have" areas of the acquis that can be postponed until the final phase of negotiations. They are the fields where vulnerabilities are exploited quickly, where hostile influence is often indirect rather than overt, and where institutional capacity is tested under pressure. They are also the areas where EU Member States increasingly expect readiness before accession, because the cost of importing unresolved vulnerabilities into the EU's internal market and security space has become politically unacceptable.

Cybersecurity is the clearest illustration of this shift. The Western Balkans' economies are largely integrated into EU's digital market through telecom operators, cross-border service providers, government systems using shared vendors, and critical infrastructure linked to the EU single market. A serious incident in one part of the region can ripple into EU supply chains, disrupt services across borders, or create openings for data theft and ransomware campaigns that do not respect jurisdiction. The challenge is not only that WB6 lack fully acquis compliant legislation; it is that incident response in these countries depends on interoperability: shared reporting formats, trusted points of contact, tested escalation thresholds, and the capacity to handle sensitive technical information without delays or leaks. In most countries, cooperation still relies too much on ad hoc contacts and project-based capacity-building. When the next incident hits, the response often starts from scratch.

Investment security is another area where the EU's exposure is direct. Energy infrastructure, telecommunications, data centres, transport corridors, and media ecosystems in the Western Balkans shape the EU's strategic environment, including dependencies that can be leveraged in a crisis. The last decade has shown that "investment" is not always only commercial. Ownership opacity, state-linked capital, political financing, and strategic acquisitions can create long-term leverage and distort governance. The EU's FDI screening framework exists for a reason: to identify security risks brought through investments from third countries early and coordinate responses. Yet the Western Balkans remains uneven in both legal readiness and practical screening capacity, while practically they are not typical third countries for the EU in this context since the EU is the biggest economic partner for all of them. Even where laws exist, implementation is often thin: beneficial ownership is hard to verify, risk criteria are vague, and decisions can be captured by short-term politics. The EU is left with a familiar problem: a region that is economically connected to the EU, but not systematically connected to EU risk assessment and early-warning routines.

Rule of law sits underneath everything else. Weak public procurement systems, political interference in oversight bodies, selective enforcement, and corruption are not only domestic governance problems; they are entry points for strategic corruption and organised crime that ultimately affect the EU's internal security and market. They also shape the credibility of every other policy area. A cybersecurity strategy does not work if procurement is corrupt and systems are bought from compromised vendors. Investment screening does not work if institutions cannot enforce restrictions or if decisions are politically traded. Counter-disinformation measures do not work if public broadcasters are captured or if regulators are intimidated. The challenge is that the EU's

rule-of-law leverage has been inconsistent across the region, partly because monitoring and follow-up mechanisms are not applied in a comparable way. Where scrutiny is selective, governments can present compliance as a matter of negotiation rather than implementation.

Judicial and prosecutorial cooperation is where these governance risks translate into operational outcomes as effective law enforcement by justice and law enforcement systems is critical to preventing and combating such risks by upholding the rule of law. Organised crime networks, trafficking routes, money laundering schemes, and procurement fraud do not stop at borders. When case coordination is slow, evidence sharing is patchy, or requests get stuck in incompatible procedures, criminal actors gain time and space and rule of law is compromised. Eurojust and EPPO matter here not as symbols, but as tools that can make cross-border cooperation predictable and fast. The challenge is that cooperation often remains uneven: some channels exist, others depend on time-limited projects, and routine coordination can be undermined by capacity gaps, trust deficits, or political interference. EPPO adds an additional layer of complexity because its mandate is specific and cooperation requires strict safeguards on data handling and procedural integrity. But the fact that it is complex does not make it optional; it makes the need for structured, staged cooperation stronger. Such cooperation is also critical in the long run to prepare WB6 for full EU membership since it is critical for the latter to implement legal and other reforms required to institutionalise such cooperation as legally binding and internalise the day to day practice sustaining it. This is, in turn, critical for the WB6 institutions to become part of the single institutional space with the EU.

Fundamental rights as a key acquis area may look like a different category, but it is tightly linked to the same operational reality. Rights problems in the Western Balkans can drive social polarisation, erode trust in institutions, and create grievances that hostile actors exploit through disinformation and identity politics. They also intersect with security policy: surveillance and data retention, the use of digital tools by authorities, and the treatment of vulnerable communities are all areas where governance quality affects stability. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) matters because it sets standards and methods for credible evidence and comparable data. The challenge is that data quality and institutional independence vary across the region, and rights-related monitoring can be politicised. Without a methodologically solid approach, debates become anecdotal and polarised, which is the opposite of what both the EU and the region need.

Disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) are now routine features of the European security environment, and the Western Balkans is often a testing ground. Narratives are trialled in local language spaces, amplified through regional media ecosystems, and then migrate into EU Member States through diaspora networks and platform dynamics. The EU has built tools for internal resilience, but the Western Balkans remains only loosely connected to EU analytical and coordination routines. The challenge is not simply "more media literacy." It is the lack of structured liaison: shared indicators, regular exchanges, crisis-time protocols, and channels to compare patterns across borders. Without that, responses are slow, fragmented, and easy to outpace.

Across these fields, a pattern repeats. Legal approximation matters, but it does not create operational capability and enforcement practices by itself. Systems and enforcement work when institutions share routines, trust, and tested procedures. This is where operational integration becomes the practical bridge between enlargement on paper and security in real life through effective enforcement. Operational integration helps because it translates strategic alignment into day-to-day cooperation that can be measured. It creates structured interfaces where participation is possible, and liaison protocols where formal membership is not. It allows staged access based on benchmarks, so cooperation deepens where standards are met and remains limited where they are not. It also makes reversibility real: if institutions backslide or mishandle sensitive information, access can be tightened without collapsing the broader political relationship. Most importantly, it shifts the centre of gravity away from symbolism and towards performance. Instead of asking whether the Western Balkans is "ready" in the abstract, operational integration asks whether institutions can coordinate, respond, enforce, and protect shared interests under pressure. That is the logic behind prioritising these policy areas. They are where the EU's resilience is tested, where the Western Balkans' capacity matters beyond accession rhetoric, and where a staged operational track can reduce risks now while making the accession-driven reform process more sustainable eventual membership more credible later.

What operational integration means in practice?

Operational integration refers to the effective participation of WB6 institutions and experts in the work of EU agencies and mechanisms, especially those that are about

security, rule of law, and economic resilience. In practical terms, this includes: observer or liaison participation in agencies, working groups, or coordination meetings; advancing existing access to EU training programmes, exercises, and technical networks; contribution to reporting, data collection, and risk assessment; use of secure channels for information exchange; advancing participation in existing or new joint operations, investigations, or pilot projects where legally feasible.

This approach is guided by three principles. First, it is merit-based and conditional, with participation linked to clear legal and institutional benchmarks. Second, it is mutually beneficial, strengthening EU-wide systems while building capacities of institutions in WB6 countries. Third, it is politically realistic, relying on existing legal bases and agency practices. Priority domains for operational integration can include cybersecurity, rule of law, countering disinformation and malign foreign influence, etc.

Operational integration in cybersecurity would start with working arrangements between the **EU Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA)** and each WB6 national cybersecurity authority, with appointed points of contact, a short list of priorities, and a calendar of joint activities that repeats every year. In practice, the value is not in declarations but in routines: WB6 teams taking part in ENISA-led training and exercises where participation is possible, using compatible incident categories, reporting templates, and escalation thresholds, and agreeing in advance how to handle spill-over incidents that hit suppliers or infrastructure connected to the EU market. A next step is to build structured liaison with **EU Computer Security Incident Response Teams (CSIRTs)—**not by claiming entry into EU-only networks, but by agreeing protocols for notification, triage, and cross-border coordination that can be tested in tabletop exercises and improved after each cycle. Where legally feasible, WB6 authorities could also be invited to observe or take part in selected ENISA technical working groups on a defined scope, so they are exposed to EU operational practice in real time and not through second-hand summaries. The reality check is straightforward: ENISA is an EU body and the EU CSIRTs Network under NIS2 is designed for Member States, so anything that looks like “observer status” depends on what the legal framework allows and on Commission-approved arrangements. That is why the goal should be interoperability and predictable cooperation—measured by response times, clarity of procedures, and safe handling of information—rather than slogans about membership.

Operational integration on investment security would mean WB6 governments adopting screening systems that actually function: clear legal triggers, defined timelines, a workable definition of security and public order risks, and the ability to gather ownership

and control information without guessing. The practical starting point is alignment of concepts and procedures with the EU approach so that a "high-risk investment" is assessed against comparable criteria across jurisdictions, especially in energy, telecoms, ports, critical infrastructure, and media. Because the EU's formal cooperation mechanism under the FDI Screening Regulation relies on Member State contact points and a secure exchange system, WB6 cannot simply be inserted into that setup as contact points under the current design. **The realistic option is perhaps a Commission-coordinated WB6–EU coordination layer that interfaces with the EU mechanism by streamlining practical cooperation with each WB6 and accommodating it in the context of EU accession reforms**: shared notification templates, a common risk taxonomy, and periodic joint briefings where WB6 authorities can flag sensitive transactions early and the Commission can provide structured feedback on risk patterns. Participation can also be built through invitation-based technical sessions linked to the Commission's coordination work, without pretending it is the same thing as Member State access. The reality check here is about trust and data: meaningful screening often involves sensitive commercial information and beneficial ownership intelligence, so deeper cooperation requires strict confidentiality rules, clarity on onward sharing, and an agreed standard on what evidence is sufficient for risk-based decisions. This is also where you should be careful not to claim "this already exists"; in most cases the gap is that cooperation is ad hoc and fragmented, rather than anchored in a standing format that produces predictable early warning.

Operational integration in rule of law should look like consistent monitoring and follow-up across all WB6, rather than a patchwork where some countries are covered by EU reporting tools and others are left outside a comparable framework. In practice, it means a predictable cycle: assessment against a comprehensive shared framework, clear benchmarks with timelines, implementation and enforcement tracking that looks at institutional behaviour and clear track record that is transparent and comparable, and repeat checks that distinguish between cosmetic legal changes and actual delivery. It should also create an operational link to reform support: when a deficit is identified—judicial independence, prosecution capacity, public procurement integrity—the follow-up should include targeted technical assistance, measurable milestones, and consequences for backsliding. A key part is usability at home: beyond vague encouragements, civil society, journalists, oversight institutions, and parliaments need stable benchmarks and timelines they can cite. The reality check is that the EU already has elements of monitoring in place for parts of the region, so the proposal here is not to "invent a new tool," but to apply comparable coverage and follow-up discipline across the whole region. Politically, this will be contested, and that is precisely the point:

operational integration in rule of law only works if the EU is consistent when governments push back and try to negotiate the scrutiny itself. However, it enables the EU to apply both positive and negative conditionality in its enlargement policy and supports the WB6 countries to consistently prevent backsliding and correct it during their individual accession processes through well targeted reform measures.

Operational integration with the **European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)** would focus on comparable evidence and methods, not only on formal participation in this EU-only governance structure. In practice, it means agreeing how data is collected, validated and reported in areas where evidence is often weak or politicised—hate crime reporting, discrimination indicators, treatment of vulnerable groups, and the rights impact of digital governance and security measures. This is not abstract: without comparable data, reforms become performative and EU dialogue becomes a debate over anecdotes. A practical model is structured cooperation around methodology, periodic technical exchanges, and targeted capacity building so national institutions can produce credible datasets that withstand scrutiny and feed into EU-level analysis. The reality check is twofold: first, FRA's core mandate and networks are EU-centred, so this is about structured cooperation rather than "membership"; second, credibility depends on institutional independence, and in some settings data collection bodies face political pressure. That means the design needs safeguards—transparency, methodology standards, and clear separation from partisan influence—otherwise the cooperation produces numbers that nobody trusts.

Operational integration with the **European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO)** should be framed narrowly around outcomes: protecting the EU budget and reducing cross-border loopholes that fraud networks exploit. In practice, it means standardised referral formats, appointed contact points that are reachable and empowered, joint training on procurement fraud and grant manipulation patterns, and routines for quick coordination when EU-funded programmes are implicated. It also means learning to work with EPPO's evidentiary and data-handling expectations, so leads arriving from WB6 partners are actionable rather than too thin to use. Where formal cooperation arrangements are legally and politically feasible, they should be made predictable and consistent across the region; where they are not, technical liaison formats should still allow timely exchange of case leads and operational coordination with national prosecutors and investigators. The reality check is that EPPO has a specific mandate and strict handling requirements, so cooperation will always be bounded by jurisdiction, data protection, and national legal constraints. The proposal is not to blur those boundaries, but to make coordination routine and reliable where shared interests are clear—

especially on fraud and corruption affecting EU funds. Cooperation with EPPO is also timely given that it has now gained much more weight as a requirement for the WB6 in order to receive the EU funds earmarked for them under the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.

Operational integration through civil service exchange would mean a structured, merit-based scheme that would also enable **WB6 civil servants to be placed for up to six months inside relevant European Commission Directorates-General (DGs),** working on live files under clear confidentiality and conflict-of-interest rules. The purpose is practical administrative interoperability: understanding how Commission services plan implementation, draft technical measures, run inter-service coordination, manage deadlines, and translate political priorities into legal requirements, institutional systems and enforceable procedures. On return, these officials are able to turn EU requirements into workable national steps, and they can act as internal "translators" inside their administrations, reducing reliance on external consultants and template transposition. This is one of the few operational integration tools that directly upgrades institutional muscle memory rather than only changing legislation. The reality check is that the Commission already uses secondment-style models in different forms, but a WB6-focused scheme would need a clear HR/legal basis, budget cover, and strict guardrails on access to sensitive files. It would also need to be designed so it cannot be dismissed as "membership by stealth": transparent selection criteria, defined learning objectives, and deliverables tied to concrete files.

Operational integration against information threats means linking WB6 actors to EU analytical routines on **foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI)** through liaison protocols, shared indicators, and crisis-time procedures, especially around elections. In practice, it would include structured exchanges with **EUvsDisinfo**, so narrative patterns, campaign techniques, and recurring actors are identified early and compared across countries, rather than rediscovered separately by each capital. It should also build a practical bridge to the **European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)** model through an affiliated hub or node for the Western Balkans, so monitoring and research are not isolated by country and donor cycle. A low-hanging fruit is the **EU Internet Forum**, which brings together EU institutions, Member States, agencies and platforms around illegal and harmful content; WB6 participation can be organised through invitation-based sessions, thematic workstreams, or joint briefings that focus on the region's threat picture without claiming formal standing in EU-internal governance bodies. The reality check matters here more than anywhere: mechanisms like the EU Rapid Alert System are designed for EU institutions and Member States, so

the workable model is an interface—liaison channels, agreed information-handling rules, and tested election-period protocols—rather than promising "participation" where the legal basis is not there. The proposal is not to blur EU internal tools, but to make sure the Western Balkans is connected to EU analysis and coordination quickly enough to be useful.

Operational integration can also be applied to the financial and border plumbing that affects EU security every day: anti-money laundering, asset recovery, and customs risk management. In practice, this means routine operational liaison, common templates, joint training, and secure channels so suspicious flows are flagged early, assets can be traced across jurisdictions, and customs risk indicators are shared in time to matter. It is not about building new institutions; it is about getting the same basic routines to run across borders with fewer delays and fewer gaps that organised crime and corrupt networks exploit. The reality check is that some cooperation already exists through projects and bilateral links, but it is often temporary and uneven—operational integration would standardise it, benchmark it, and make it durable beyond funding cycles.

A menu of operational integration

Operational integration should be offered as a differentiated menu, allowing countries to progress at different speeds while keeping the overall objective of regional convergence.

- **Incremental-level participation** includes working arrangements with EU agencies, access to training and exercises, designation of national liaison points, and participation in technical networks.
- **Structural -level participation** involves observer status in selected working groups or coordination meetings, structured contribution to reporting cycles, and pilot participation in joint operations or certification schemes.
- **Transformational - level participation** entails regular observer roles in agency governance or coordination formats, systematic information exchange through secure channels, and routine involvement in joint investigations or risk-assessment processes.

Progression along this menu should be conditional, transparent, and linked to measurable benchmarks. Importantly, movement should be reversible if standards are not maintained. The WB6 differ significantly in preparedness. Albania and Montenegro are institutionally more advanced in several domains, while Kosovo has moved quickly in cybersecurity and investment screening despite political constraints. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia face deeper structural and political challenges in specific areas.

Operational integration should reward readiness without locking countries into permanent tiers. Early movers should be allowed to advance, creating incentives for others, while EU support focuses on closing gaps and preventing lasting divergence.

Over the next two years, the EU and the WB6 could focus on a limited number of visible steps: extending the Rule of Law Report to all six countries; concluding missing working arrangements with Eurojust and EPPO; launching structured ENISA cooperation with ready partners; **piloting WB6 participation in FDI screening coordination**; and systematising cooperation on countering disinformation and malign foreign influence.

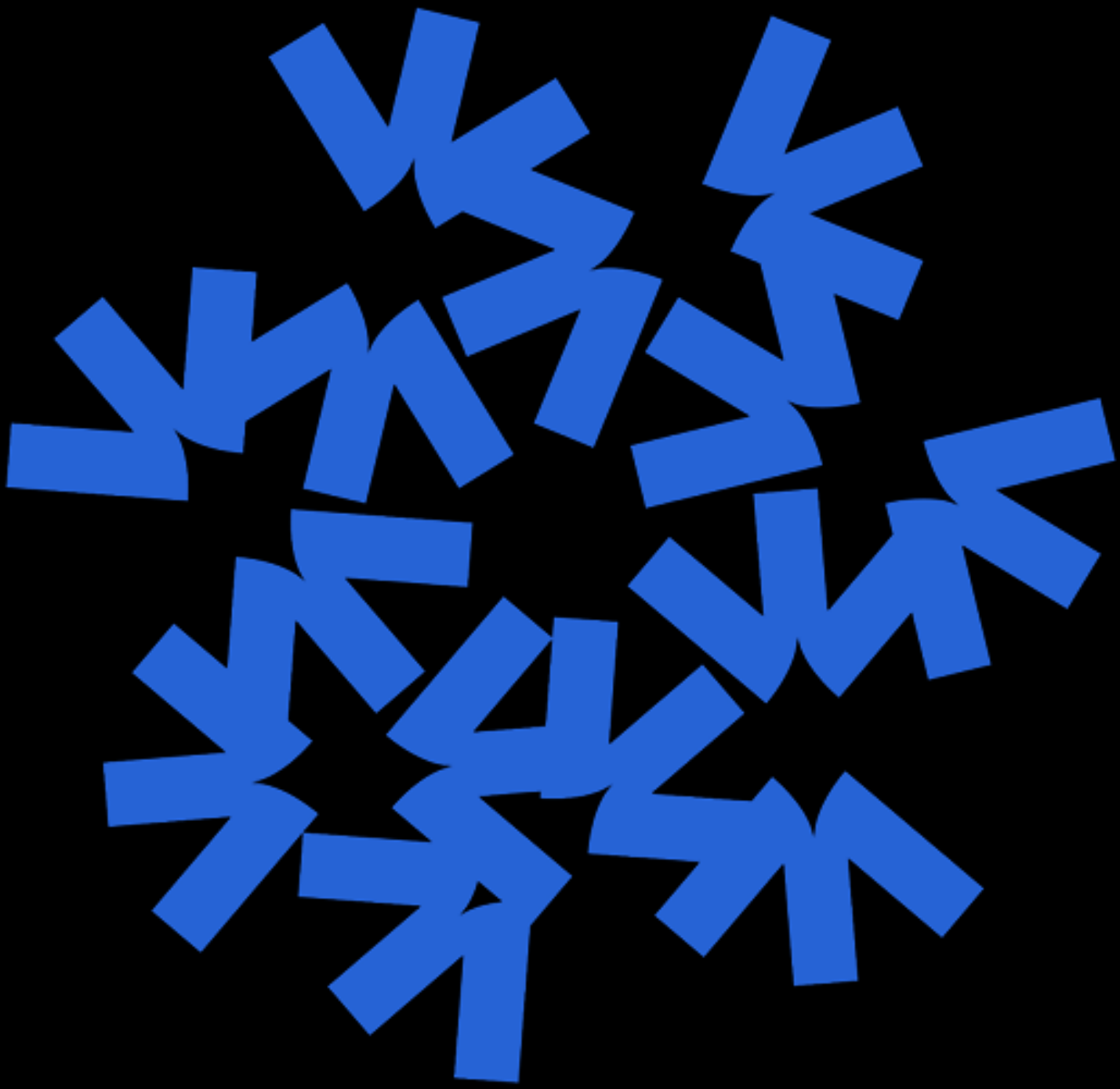
Operational integration is the missing middle between political promises and legal accession. It offers a way to keep enlargement credible, reduce security and governance risks, and avoid a two-speed Western Balkans as some countries move ahead of others. For the EU, it is a pragmatic investment in its own resilience. For the Western Balkans, it is a concrete pathway to demonstrate readiness and responsibility. Treated seriously, operational integration can turn gradual enlargement from an abstract concept into a lived institutional reality.

Menu of Operational Integration Options for the WB6

No	Policy Area	Operational Integration Targets		
		Incremental	***Structural***	***Transformational***
1	Cybersecurity	Advanced ENISA working arrangements with national cybersecurity authorities; Participation in ENISA-led training and workshops; Inclusion in CSIRT cooperation networks; Observer participation in technical working groups; Participation of WB6 authorities in EU Internet Forum meetings; Alignment of national legislation and regulatory practices with the Digital Services Act (DSA); Observer cooperation with EU Digital Services Coordinators;	Participation in EU-wide cyber exercises (e.g. cross-border crisis simulations); Certification pilots in critical sectors (energy, telecoms, public services); Structured liaison channels equivalent to National Liaison Officer practice	Observer status in ENISA; Contribution to EU-level threat assessments; Observer cooperation with the European Board for Digital Services

		Training for WB6 regulators on risk assessments, systemic risks, and enforcement models		
2	Investment Security/FDI	Adoption of national FDI screening laws aligned with Regulation 2019/452; Designation of national screening authorities and contact points	Observer participation in the FDI Screening Contact Points network; Access to secure information-sharing channels; Participation in technical exchanges and peer reviews	Observer participation in the FDI Screening Expert Group; Early-warning information exchange on high-risk investments; Contribution to EU-level risk trend analysis
3	Rule of Law and Justice	Inclusion in the EU Rule of Law Report (all WB6, without exception); Structured national rule-of-law dialogues facilitated by the Commission; FRA thematic cooperation (equality, justice, media freedom, minorities)	Observer participation in FRA platforms and networks; Contribution to FRA data-collection exercises; Annual national dialogues linked to Reform and Growth Facility benchmarks	Regional WB6–FRA forum; Systematic benchmarking and comparative assessment across all six; Embedded rule-of-law monitoring aligned with EU internal cycles
		EPPO concludes working arrangements with all WB6 prosecution services; Designated EPPO contact points	Observer participation in coordination meetings (case-relevant); Joint training on PIF crimes, digital evidence, asset tracing	Regular liaison arrangements; Structured case coordination for cross-border EU budget fraud
		Eurojust Cooperation agreements with all WB6 (including Kosovo); Use of Eurojust coordination meetings	Joint Investigation Teams (JITs) via IPA-funded mechanisms; Access to secure Eurojust ICT systems	Institutionalised coordination centres; Routine participation in multi-country JITs; Embedded use of Eurojust tools beyond project cycles
4	Media and Foreign	National liaison points with EEAS Strategic	Structured exchanges with	Interface mechanisms with

	Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)	Communication Task Forces; Participation in training on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI); Formal cooperation agreements between WB6 actors and European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO); Participation in joint research, monitoring, and fact-checking projects; Observer-level familiarisation with Rapid Alert System procedures; Training on incident reporting, verification, and escalation; Creation of a WB6 mirror network linked to EU RAS structures; Voluntary alignment with EMFA principles (ownership transparency, editorial independence); Working arrangements with the European Board for Media Services	EUvsDisinfo analysts; Cooperation with European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) hubs; Joint monitoring and reporting on disinformation trends; Integration of WB6 findings into EU-level reports on media integrity and FIMI; Operational interface with EU RAS during high-risk periods; Participation in EU-level discussions on foreign state-controlled media	the EU Rapid Alert System; Observer cooperation with the European Board for Media Services (EMFA); Co-creation of EU-WB6 strategic communication responses; Creation of WB6-linked EDMO hub(s) or permanent regional node; Systematic contribution to EU early-warning analysis; Observer status in the Board for Media Services
5	Security	Access to EU police training modules; Specialised courses on cybercrime, financial crime, and digital investigations	Establish working arrangements with the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL)	
6	Public Administration	Establish an exchange program for civil servants from WB6 to be embedded and work in a European Commission Directorate General (e.g., for up to 6 months)		



KCSS
Kosovar Centre for Security Studies

Ignita
igniting Collaboration

OPEN SOCIETY
FOUNDATIONS
WESTERN BALKANS