



11th edition

# TURNING THE TABLES

Tirana Connectivity Forum 2025  
Report

October 2025



# 11th edition of Tirana Connectivity Forum TURNING THE TABLES

An initiative of:



In partnership with:





**Coordinated by:**

Ardian Hackaj, Tirana Connectivity Forum Coordinator

**Publisher:**

Cooperation and Development Institute

“Dervish Hima” Street, Building No. 5, Entry 14, 1011, Tirana, Albania

E-mail: [info@cdinstitute.eu](mailto:info@cdinstitute.eu) | Website: [www.cdinstitute.eu](http://www.cdinstitute.eu)

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**Suggested Citation:**

Please cite as: Cooperation and Development Institute, October 2025, “Turning the Tables: Tirana Connectivity Forum 2025 Report”.

**Keywords:**

Security; Reform and Growth Facility; Competitiveness; Regional Cooperation; EU Membership; South East European 6; Connectivity; Reform Agenda.

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## IMPRINT

### About the Tirana Connectivity Forum (TCF)

Tirana Connectivity Forum is the only such event covering connectivity, reforms and enlargement in the South East Europe region (SEE6). The Forum is the annual European benchmark that gathers stakeholders from think tanks to policy-makers involved in EU Enlargement, Regional Cooperation and Connectivity dynamics impacting the Balkans peninsula. TCF aims to create a critical mass of knowledge on the means, resources, mechanisms and impact of multi-layered connectivity in relation to growth, development, reforms, regional cooperation and the convergence of the SEE6 with the European Union. TCF publishes the annual Tirana Connectivity Forum Report.

### About the Tirana Connectivity Forum Report

Since its first edition in 2015, TCF, in collaboration with its partners, regularly publishes the Tirana Connectivity Forum Report which contributes to creating actionable knowledge on the Berlin Process, connectivity, regional cooperation and Enlargement. The publication provides a balanced mix of TCF proceedings and of its main conclusions complemented with innovative insights, research products and arguments on interactions between multi-layered connectivity and development, reforms and regional cooperation. Its main contribution is to provide innovative and impact-oriented scenarios for ever stronger linkages and speedier convergence of SEE6 - EU.

## Table of contents

TCF2025: The Concept.....	5
DAY I.....	6
South East Europe 6 as security provider.....	7
South East Europe 6 contribution to EU competitiveness.....	9
Communicating on 2030 Enlargement.....	11
DAY II.....	12
Accelerating South East Europe 6 readiness for EU membership.....	13
Implementing regional cooperation.....	15
Key takeaways – SEE6 as the Europe’s Innovation Sandbox.....	17

## TCF2025: The concept

The [11th edition of the Tirana Connectivity Forum](#) (TCF2025) took place in a period shaped by a multi-polar world, geo-political instability and a newly revived transactional approach in the West. This context has prompted the EU and its Member States to radically increase their engagement in continent's competitiveness, security and defence.

Meanwhile, Montenegro and Albania have stepped up their commitment to reform and to close technical negotiations, respectively in 2026 and 2027. South East Europe 6 (SEE6) contribution in Europe's Connectivity, Competitiveness and Defence has emerged as an enlargement/integration rationale.

In the region, speedier alignment with the EU acquis – supported by the implementation of the Growth Plan (GP) and of the regional cooperation – is locking in recent achievements all by reinforcing region's aspirations to EU membership. Grounding its reform agenda in its EU membership target, Western Balkans countries are strengthening their agency as contributing partners to a more secure and competitive Europe.

On its side, the EU and its member states are engaged in preparing the new Union policy cycle and the corresponding Multi-Annual Financial Framework 2028-2034. With a hot conflict on its doorstep and facing trade frictions, the Union is striving for greater strategic autonomy and higher competitiveness.

By bringing together decision-makers, industry leaders, civil society, and professionals, TCF2025 focused on navigating the complexities of the EU's upcoming enlargement in the SEE6 in this volatile environment.

TCF2025 addressed the following key topics:

- SEE6 as a Security Provider
- SEE6 contribution to EU competitiveness
- Accelerating SEE6 readiness for EU membership
- Implementing Regional Cooperation

# Turning the Tables

## DAY 1 - 16 SEPTEMBER 2025

### TURNING THE TABLES: DEFENCE AND COMPETITIVENESS

During the first day, high-level political leaders, policy-makers and media personalities will present and discuss the strategic, institutional, geopolitical and communication aspects of EU enlargement and its implications for the region and for the EU.

TCF 2025 commenced with a keynote address from former EU Commissioner and Bulgarian Chief Negotiator Meglena Kuneva, who framed Albania's EU accession as a critical strategic opportunity. She argued that while technical reforms are necessary, enlargement is ultimately a political decision. Kuneva identified a current "window of opportunity" where Albania's connectivity goals in energy, digital, and transport align directly with core EU strategic interests, transforming the country from a passive candidate into a future strategic partner and "net contributor."

Stating that "hope is not a strategy", Kuneva urged Albanian leaders to adopt a proactive and strategic posture", she called for Albania to become an active agent in negotiations, confidently asserting its role as a future member. Her address served as a call to action, emphasizing the need for Albania to seize this political momentum and demonstrate its readiness to strengthen the European Union.



## SEE6 as a Security Provider

Defence and foreign policy leaders from Southeast Europe delivered a unified message: the region is already a security provider to Europe’s southern flank. Moving beyond rhetoric, the discussion provided a realistic assessment of security and defence factors in the region, and highlighted concrete cooperation initiatives covering infrastructure, military cooperation and defence industries. Panellists and discussants underlined the need for the European Union to concretely support candidate countries and NATO members in their defence endeavours.

The Bulgarian Minister of Defence Atanas Zapryanov, stressed that the security of Southeast Europe is key for the overall security of Europe, and that deeper cooperation in the region will ensure a more effective EU response to threats at both the regional and global level. Maintaining “positive, growing, and successful cooperation with the countries of the region,” he noted, is also crucial for NATO’s deterrence and defence. Bulgaria, he emphasized, has consistently contributed to strengthening stability in the Western Balkans through its support for NATO and EU missions and operations, and remains firmly committed to the Euro-Atlantic perspective of its neighbours.



Albania’s Minister of Defence, Pirro Vengu, detailed the country’s strategy to reverse decades of industrial disinvestment in defence. Through new joint ventures in armoured vehicle or ammunition production, Albania is not just rebuilding its capacity but actively seeking to contribute to the NATO industrial base. Minister Vengu emphasized that key to attracting defence investment is for the governments to have “skin in the game.” This pragmatic approach is mirrored in infrastructure, as Albania is investing over €400 million in the Port of Durrës, and sizeable amount of money – cofinanced by EU – in the road and rail links of the Corridor VIII. He called for a more pragmatic NATO-EU approach where such national investments are met with tailored funding and political support.



North Macedonia’s Deputy Foreign Minister, Zoran Dimitrovski, reframed the very language of the debate, arguing that the term “Southeast Europe Six” should replace the ubiquitous “Western Balkans” to affirm region’s European place. His central argument was unequivocal: the ultimate security guarantee for the region is EU membership. While highlighting North Macedonia’s major investments in Corridors VIII and X, he stressed that all connectivity and defense efforts are incomplete without the political finality of the EU accession. “Don’t leave Southeast Europe as an open wound,” he urged, warning that without a geopolitical decision for enlargement, the region risks remaining a “black hole” in the continent’s architecture.





Hungary’s Special Envoy for the Western Balkans, Zsolt Bunford, reinforced this view from an EU member state’s perspective, stating plainly that “Europe cannot be complete without the Western Balkans.” He extended the security concept by arguing the SEE6 are already indispensable frontline contributors in managing migration, energy security and supply chain resilience. Therefore, he asserted, EU defence instruments like SAFE must be opened to candidate countries, as European security is indivisible.



Ivica Bocevski, former Deputy Prime Minister of North Macedonia, called for immediate accession as the most effective security strategy for the whole Europe. He warned that delaying integration perpetuates instability and disillusionment, while stressing that connectivity projects like Corridor VIII should be funded as both military indispensable artery and economic lifeline.

Discussions underlined the need for closer EU - SEE6 defence cooperation in both dual-use infrastructure, military mobility and in defence economy. To reinforce this cooperation, the opening of eligibility criteria of EU programs such as SAFE and EDIP to SEE6 partners, was brought forward as a practical move that underlines EU commitment to a sound partnership with the region. The panel concluded that defence connectivity is built upon – and at the same time contributes to – mutual trust. The SEE6 countries are already contributing to Europe’s security - through troops in multinational battlegroups; by hosting critical missions, heavily investing in dual use infrastructure and aligning their security policies. The message is clear: the region is prepared to carry its share of the burden to protect Europe’s southern flank. A reciprocal commitment is needed - region’s EU membership is an urgent and logical step for a secure Europe.



## SEE6 contribution to EU competitiveness

TCF2025 second panel explored how the South East Europe 6 (SEE6) contributes to Europe's competitiveness. On top of Critical Raw Materials access, near-shoring, agri-business or increased connectivity, region's added value to Union's economy can be increased by aligning its reforms with EU priorities, boosting regional cooperation, and unlocking the potential of businesses and entrepreneurs.

The discussion highlighted a strong consensus on the region's strategic and business value to the EU all by underscoring the urgent need for accelerated reforms, smarter cooperation, and a fundamental shift in the narrative presented to European investors.

Albania's designated Minister of Economy and Innovation, Delina Ibrahimaj stressed that accession is not merely a bureaucratic process but rather a reform agenda that prepares businesses to benefit from the EU Single Market. She highlighted Albania's push towards digital governance, improved infrastructure, and higher production standards as key steps to attract investment and integrate with European value chains.



From the European Commission, Giorgio Zecca (Single Market and Common Regional market integration, DG ENEST B1, Regional Strategy & Investments) underlined the importance of the "triangle of priorities": alignment with the acquis, strengthening the rule of law, and mobilizing financial instruments – for attracting EU investments. He noted that economic growth cannot advance without trust in country's legal certainty, while pointing out ongoing initiatives such as SEPA, roaming, and green lanes as concrete steps bringing SEE6 closer to the EU's single market.

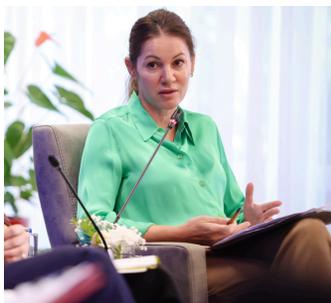


Stjepan Orešković, Founder of Bosqar Invest and President of the SB of IEDC Bled School of Management, offered a critical perspective on Europe's competitiveness, arguing that the region must focus on supporting entrepreneurs and companies with global growth potential rather than insisting on maintaining uncompetitive industries. He presented the "Future 500" initiative as a way to spotlight firms capable of becoming future European champions, while also noting that Albania and the whole SEE6 region has the energy and talent to surprise with new success stories. SEE6 location, human resources, normative framework and positive energy can make the region.



Blerina Raca, Project Manager at GIZ Albania, provided a ground-level perspective, highlighting the critical need to better prepare and "shake up" Albanian businesses for the realities of the Single Market. She detailed existing yet underutilized EU programs available to Albanian companies now, such as Horizon Europe and the Single Market Programme, urging businesses to get informed and proactively seize these opportunities.





Representing the private sector, Marinela Jazoj, Executive Director of the Foreign Investors Association of Albania, called for a more inclusive and efficient implementation of reforms. An effective cooperation between government, institutions, and business is required, as well as closer ties with EU partners to ensure that opportunities from instruments such as the Growth Plan or the upcoming Cohesion and Competitiveness-related instruments translate into real benefits for local companies.



Jean-Christophe Bass from the Aspen Institute delivered a crucial external perspective, warning about the "information gap" and outdated stereotypes about the region. He argued for a proactive "Team Albania/Western Balkans" advocacy campaign for an evidence-based narrative that highlights SEE6 economies as contributors, not just beneficiaries, of Europe's prosperity - showcasing success stories, opportunities and partnerships, and the region's role in strengthening Union's resilience at a time of global uncertainty.



In a video-message address, Deputy Minister of Economy and Innovation Olta Manjani, presented the upcoming EU - Western Balkans Investment Forum, that will take place in Tirana in mid - October 2025. The Investment forum will focus on nearshoring, regional cooperation, and showcasing promising sectors such as ICT, renewable energy, agribusiness, and tourism, with the aim of translating multi-partner dialogue into concrete investment partnerships. She underlined Albania's strategic advantages - its location, youthful workforce,

and reform trajectory - while stressing that SEE6 regional market should be viewed not as a periphery, but as a strategic extension of the EU Single Market.

The panel concluded that the list of opportunities for the Western Balkans is longer and much more relevant than the list of perceived risks. In the immediate future, the region is poised to be a strategic extension of the EU single market, particularly through nearshoring. Due to its current position and government commitment, Albania can be Europe's Innovation Sandbox where new technologies – and especially AI for Public Services – constitute an absolute competitive advantage.

However, unlocking this potential requires a dual track approach: internally, a relentless focus on implementing rule of law and business environment reforms is non-negotiable; while externally, a confident, evidence-based narrative accompanied by targeted support measures must be broadcast across the EU to change perceptions and attract strategic investment. The success of the Montenegro and Albania 2030 EU Membership target depends on this synergy - turning the tables from being perceived as beneficiaries to becoming indispensable partners in a more competitive Europe.

## Communicating on 2030 Enlargement

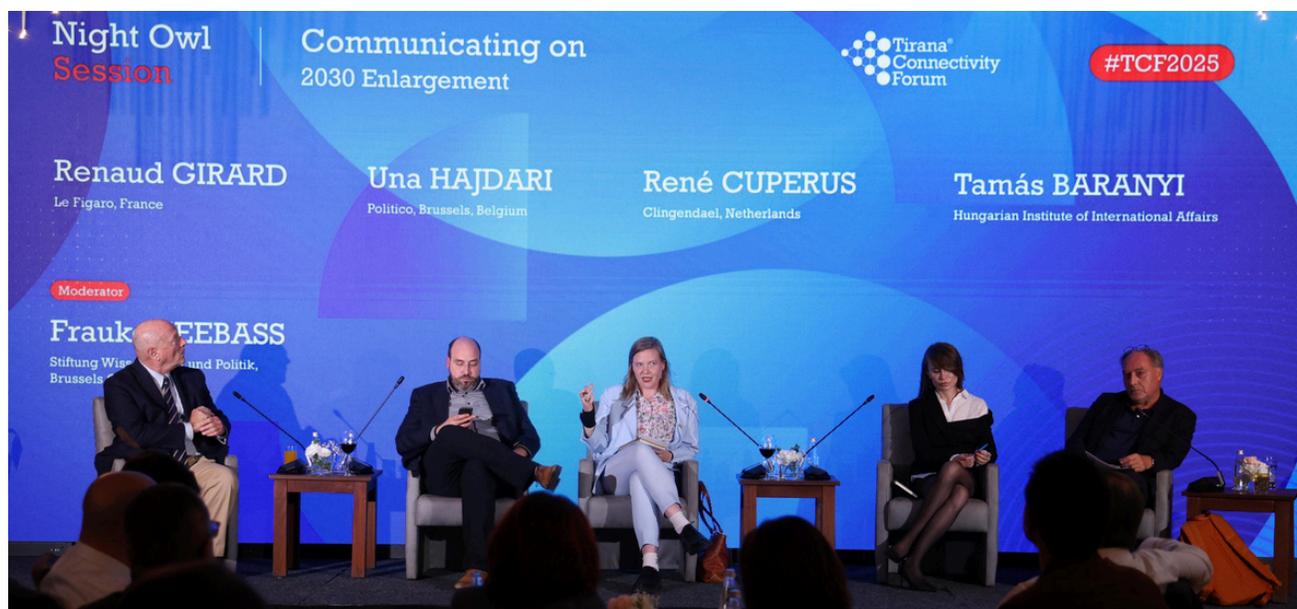
The challenge of the next EU enlargement is not only about institutions, reforms, opening / closing chapters or timelines—it is also about communicating and conveying these dynamics to the EU citizens. And here narratives count. For decades, the Balkans have too often been framed as “outside” of Europe and the Enlargement as a cost. Both narratives - reinforced by information gaps and unchallenged stereotypes - continue to shape perceptions among many EU citizens and policymakers.

The Night Owl session, “Communicating the 2030 Enlargement,” brought together a top French geopolitical commentator, a Brussels insider journalist, a Dutch policy advisor and a Hungarian think tanker to explore if enlargement is a story of resilience, stability, and opportunity; or a burden for the EU. Renaud Girard (Le Figaro), Una Hajdari (Politico), René Cuperus (Clingendael), Tamás Baranyi (Hungarian Institute of International Affairs), and Frauke Seebass (SWP), examined the narratives surrounding the potential accession of Albania, Montenegro, and of other candidate countries by 2030, and entered their discussion focused on three critical fronts:

- **Geopolitics:** enlargement as a security asset rather than a liability.
- **Brussels Messaging:** countering enlargement fatigue with compelling communication dynamics.
- **Public Trust:** bringing in the added value of Enlargement and building evidence-based narratives.

Panellists stressed that public trust and strategic communication are as vital as institutional reforms to counter stereotypes and strengthen support for integration. The EU must seize the moment to craft a fact - based, strategic narrative for enlargement also including the tangible benefits that the region brings for EU citizen. Panellists stressed the urgency of framing the debate around shared European values and strategic interests. They warned that, if left unaddressed, populist and reductive arguments could poison public discourse and undermine the Union’s foundational principles, as well as its own interests.

Without narratives that resonate with EU citizens’ daily realities - migration, security, competitiveness, wellbeing - candidate countries technical reforms alone will not build trust. How enlargement is framed today will determine whether it is considered as a burden - or as one of Europe’s boldest steps forward.



## DAY II - 17 SEPTEMBER 2025

## LOCKING IN: GROWTH PLAN AND REGIONAL COOPERATION

The second day of TCF2025 focused on policy planning and implementation through two dedicated roundtables, where high EU officials, member state executives, SEE6 policy-makers, experts and practitioners shared their take on EU relevant instruments and on Regional Cooperation.

On the second day, leaders reaffirmed the momentum toward Albania's 2030 EU accession.

Foreign Minister designate for Europe and Foreign Affairs Elisa Spiropali, highlighted Albania's historic trajectory: from stability-building to EU frontrunner. The Minister designates emphasized connectivity as a key pillar of Albania's foreign policy. In a call for action, she framed Enlargement as a strategic investment, not a concession – that strengthens Europe's geopolitical influence; unlocks new economic growth drivers; and anchors EU values in the SEE6 region. "Turning the tables" means seeing enlargement as a mutual success story. She ended by stating that Albania is fully committed to fulfil its part of engagements.



Amb. Michael Reiffenstuel, Director for Southeastern Europe, Türkiye, the OSCE and the Council of Europe at the German Federal Foreign Office, emphasized Germany's commitment in supporting EU enlargement in WB6 and its focus on practical integration milestones (Common Regional Market / Single Market access, security, connectivity) through Berlin Process. He noted the contribution of the region in the Connectivity & Security of South East Europe region and emphasized Germany's role in supporting country reforms with focus on institutional readiness, energy transition, and regional mobility. Amb. Michael Reiffenstuel ended by underlining that enlargement remains a core strategic goal of the EU and Germany's foreign policy.



Underlying the Importance of enlargement for both EU and Candidate Countries, the Director for Western Balkans at DG ENEST, Valentina Superti, praised Albania's progress. She mentioned the tangible benefits that accelerated integration measures have brought on the citizen and businesses: such as elimination of roaming charges or integration into SEPA – as examples of how adapting Enlargement toolbox is helping accelerate integration, convergence and increase readiness. She ended by signalling Brussels' commitment to support frontrunners Montenegro and Albania in their reforms for 2030 target date.





Closing the keynote session, Amer Kapetanović, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, injected a note of “strong and realistic regional optimism,” citing the RCC’s latest Balkan Barometer survey, which shows rising trust in regional cooperation and the highest support for EU membership in the last five years, particularly among youth. He identified the EU Growth Plan and the opportunity for gradual access to the single market as a potential “game changer.” Kapetanović concluded by reminding the audience that regional cooperation will remain essential even after EU accession, with the shared task of ensuring “that the ghosts from the past that have been haunting us for decades are finally laid to rest.”

### Accelerating SEE6 readiness for EU membership



Opening the “Accelerating SEE6 readiness for EU membership” roundtable, CDI Executive Director Krisela Hackaj underlined that EU performance-based instruments are reshaping the enlargement landscape. She stated that today, the discussion is not just about conditionality but about practicing EU membership obligations through concrete, performance-based and verifiable results.



From Albania's perspective, RGF National Coordinator Eridana Cano stressed that the functioning of the Facility is not only a condition to be filled, but a transformative process that will bring closer the country to the EU standards. She pointed to the ongoing reforms in cutting red tape for businesses, improving governance of state-owned enterprises, introducing transparent energy pricing, or strengthening judicial accountability. Cano affirmed that the facility is not abstract but is already changing the daily life for Albanian citizens and the operations of local businesses, noting that each reform step must be fully achieved, documented, and verified to reinforce both accountability and ownership.



Montenegro's State Secretary for European Affairs, Biljana Papović, described the RGF and the accession negotiations as two sides of the same coin. She highlighted the growing synergy between reform progress and citizen trust, adding that while the mechanism is technically complex, it is essential to communicate its impact in simple terms - like better schools, cleaner energy, better business environment and a stronger rule of law. She argued that this communication is crucial for sustaining Montenegro's public consensus on EU integration, which remains above 80 percent.

On behalf of the European Commission, Judith Rózsa, Director at the Reform and Investment Task Force, drew direct parallels between RGF and the EU's own Recovery and Resilience Facility. She reminded participants that the accession journey is also a reform journey and that it does not end with membership. While acknowledging the political costs and administrative demands, Director Rózsa underscored that the RRF performance-based model is now the new standard for EU support, urging governments to front-load difficult reforms.



Giorgio Zecca from DG ENEST reinforced this message, framing the RGF as a proving ground to build the administrative muscle now for tomorrow's membership obligations. He urged governments and the EU to move beyond narratives of payments and disbursements towards a more positive communication that highlights the tangible advantages of the engaged courageous reforms.



Closing the session, Tanja Mišćević, former Minister of European Affairs of Serbia, reminded participants that reforms are not temporary hurdles but permanent tasks towards development, growth and social progress. She concluded that the Growth Plan helps the region learn today what they will need to deliver tomorrow as EU members.

The discussion made clear that the Western Balkans are not waiting passively for membership: through the RGF, they are actively testing and strengthening their governance, economic resilience, and reform culture - turning EU aspirations into measurable results.



## Implementing Regional Cooperation



In his opening remarks, Karl Bergner, the German Ambassador to Albania, framed regional integration as a strategic imperative. He stated that the Berlin Process is not an alternative to EU accession but a multi-purpose vehicle that prepares the region, delivers immediate benefits, and builds a spirit of cooperation. While praising Albania's constructive stance, he urged continued investment in regional cooperation.



Pranvera Kastrati, the newly-appointed Director of Central European Free Trade Agreement Secretariat, provided a technical perspective of regional cooperation achievements, like reduced border waiting times and mutual recognition of trusted trader programs. Kastrati explained that the Common Regional Market is a preparatory ground for EU integration, with the current challenge being to combat fragmentation through targeted support.



Kevin Bufi, Advisor to the Prime Minister of Albania and Coordinator for Regional Cooperation, described the CRM as a rehearsal for country's future in the Union. He outlined CRM value in expanding economic opportunities, driving reforms, and illustrating regional cooperation added value for the citizen and businesses. Bufi stated that the CRM is implementing EU obligations in practice, and that implementation and communication of CRM must now be the main priority.



Tanja Bošković, Project Leader RegioTrade at GIZ, confirmed that real progress is being made in intra-regional trade but identified a critical gap between political commitments and actual implementation. She noted that this challenge is exacerbated by stretched administrative capacities within region's governments.



Emir Džanić, Vice Rector for Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Startups at Tirana Metropolitan University, argued for fusing trade policy in the region with industrial and innovation strategies. He emphasized the need to incentivize the transfer of knowledge from EU companies to regional academia and startups.



Sasho Kjosev, President of the Balkans Economic Forum, provided a sobering economic analysis, warning the region is losing 1-2% of GDP growth annually due to the incomplete common market. Kjosev remarked that the SEE6 countries are champions in producing laws but laggards in implementation, urging leaders to depoliticize regional cooperation.



In her concluding summary, Maja Handjiska Trendafilova Director of the Regional School for Public Administration, emphasized that the regions credibility depends on its ability to deliver. She stated that the future of regional cooperation must be lived and breathed in the daily lives of civil servants, underscoring that robust administrative capacity is the foundation for all progress.



## Key takeaways – SEE6 as the Europe’s Innovation Sandbox

Built upon “Turning the Tables” concept, Tirana Connectivity Forum 2025 focused on the SEE6 added value to the EU. The forum brought together a wide spectrum of stakeholders, including EU and Western Balkans politicians, policymakers, civil society, IFI representatives, and economic business actors, to reflect and to chart the course for future cooperation amongst EU and SEE6 partners. Reflecting the 2030 EU membership objective, the focus was on frontrunners Montenegro and Albania. The main message is that SEE6 countries are emerging as proactive partners with tangible contribution to Europe’s future.

The Forum further contributed to navigate the complexities of the EU’s upcoming enlargement in the SEE6. The challenge of the next EU enlargement is not only about institutions, reforms, opening / closing chapters or timelines - it is also about communicating and conveying these dynamics to the EU citizens and businesses.

Reflecting the geopolitical context, defence and foreign policy leaders from Southeast Europe delivered a unified message: the region is already a security provider to Europe’s southern flank. TCF2025 provided a realistic assessment of security and defence factors in the region, with highlights of concrete cooperation initiatives covering infrastructure, military cooperation and defence industries. The need for the European Union to concretely support candidate countries and NATO members in their defence endeavours was particularly underlined.

Building upon the Draghi report, TCF2025 explored how SEE6 practically can contribute to Europe’s competitiveness. To benefit from its Critical Raw Materials, green energy, nearshoring, agri-business or increased connectivity, SEE6 should speed up their reforms and alignment with EU and boost regional cooperation. The region must focus on supporting entrepreneurs and companies with global growth potential rather than insisting on maintaining uncompetitive industries. **SEE6 can become Europe’s Innovation Sandbox.**

To make that happen, an effective cooperation between government, institutions, and business is required, as well as closer ties with EU partners. Tailored EU policies and instruments such as the Growth Plan or the upcoming Cohesion and Competitiveness-related instruments, are key to ensure that opportunities translate into real benefits for both EU and SEE6 actors.

TCF continues to provide the methodological socle and cooperation instruments needed for the politicians, policy-makers, project implementers, financial actors, businesses and social actors to communicate, exchange, debate and reach a common understanding on challenges and ways to overcome them in the SEE6 accession path towards full EU membership.



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