



POSITION PAPER:

BRINGING THE WESTERN BALKANS INTO THE EU DEMOCRACY SHIELD AND THE EDMO ECOSYSTEM

MAY 2026



on behalf of

**ANTI DISINFORMATION NETWORK FOR THE BALKANS
(ADN-BALKANS)**

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Bringing the Western Balkans into the EU Democracy Shield and the EDMO Ecosystem

Position paper

May 2026

BY: THE ANTI-DISINFORMATION NETWORK FOR THE BALKANS

ADDRESSEES: DG ENEST, DG CONNECT, EEAS, AND RELEVANT EUROPEAN COMMISSION SERVICES

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE: ALBANIA, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, KOSOVO, MONTENEGRO, NORTH MACEDONIA AND SERBIA



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Executive message

The Anti-Disinformation Network for the Balkans calls on the European Commission and the EEAS to **formally include the Western Balkans Six in the operational architecture of the European Democracy Shield**, particularly through the **European Centre for Democratic Resilience and its stakeholder platform**, and to establish a structured pathway for the region's integration into the **European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) ecosystem**.

This is not a request to create a parallel mechanism. It is a request to make the EU Democracy Shield operational where democratic vulnerability, enlargement credibility and foreign information manipulation intersect most directly. The Commission has already defined the European Centre for Democratic Resilience¹ as a framework for exchange and operational cooperation among Member States, EU candidate countries, potential candidates and EU institutions, with a stakeholder platform for civil society, researchers and academia. The Western Balkans should therefore be included from the outset as an integral part of Europe's democratic security perimeter.

Why the Western Balkans belong inside the Democracy Shield

The Western Balkans are not an external neighbourhood in democratic-resilience terms. They are an accession region whose information space is closely intertwined with the EU's security, enlargement and democratic agenda. The Commission's [enlargement policy](#) recognises enlargement as a driver of long-term security, peace, stability and prosperity, and supports accession countries in implementing democratic reforms.² The Commission has also stated that full EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the Union's political, security and [economic interest](#).³

Disinformation, foreign information manipulation and interference, election-related manipulation, attacks on independent media, and anti-EU narratives directly undermine that accession trajectory. [Regional monitoring](#) by the Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub found that the third quarter of 2025 was marked by an intensified anti-EU and anti-Western disinformation environment, with narratives portraying the EU as ineffective, hostile, biased and coercive, aiming to erode trust in European and transatlantic institutions and undermine democratic governance.⁴ [Earlier monitoring](#) also identified coordinated disinformation campaigns during a period marked by elections, EU accession talks and public crises, with anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives contributing to unrest, polarization and reduced confidence in democratic institutions.⁵

Metamorphosis' [regional analyses](#) further shows that the Western Balkans are exposed to intensified global competition, hybrid threats, external influence by Russia and China, and [information operations](#)

¹ [European Centre for Democratic Resilience - European Commission](#)

² [Enlargement - European Commission \(EC\)](#)

³ [New €6 billion growth plan to bring Western Balkans closer to joining the EU – EC](#)

⁴ [Disinformation Trends and Narratives in the Western Balkan Region - Media Monitoring Report July-September 2025 – Antidisinfo.net](#)

⁵ [Disinformation Trends and Narratives in the Western Balkan Region - Media Monitoring Report April-June 2025 – Antidisinfo.net](#)

[that affect Euro-Atlantic integration](#), institutional resilience and public perception.⁶ This makes the Western Balkans a practical test case for the EU Democracy Shield’s whole-of-society approach.

This relevance extends into the EU itself through the region’s large diaspora communities, many of whom continue to rely on media and online sources from their countries of origin. Election-related disinformation and FIMI in the Western Balkans can therefore also affect public debate inside EU Member States. Recent [mapping](#) by BIRN Kosovo and Internews Kosova has documented the role of Russian and Serbian sources in spreading disinformation, including in [politically sensitive and election-related contexts](#),⁷ while [BIRN’s regional digital-rights monitoring](#) points to the need for stronger protection of freedom of expression, pluralism of information, privacy and digital civic participation.⁸ This is particularly important given that several Western Balkan countries rank among the most vulnerable in Europe in the [2026 Media Literacy Index](#).⁹

The EU policy opportunity

The [European Democracy Shield](#) focuses on three priority areas: safeguarding the integrity of the information space, strengthening democratic institutions, free and fair elections and free media, and boosting societal resilience and citizens’ engagement.¹⁰ The Commission has announced measures including a Digital Services Act incidents and crisis protocol, an independent European Network of Fact-Checkers, support for EDMO, election-related measures, journalist-safety action, media and digital literacy, and the new European Centre for Democratic Resilience.¹¹

These priorities map directly onto the Western Balkans and highlight the added value of structured cooperation with EU Member States, including Greece and Bulgaria. The region faces cross-border disinformation, recurrent crisis-triggered narratives, election-related manipulation, and local-language vulnerabilities that are not sufficiently visible in EU-level situational awareness. At the same time, the region already has relevant local capacity. [ADN-Balkans](#) brings together civil society organisations, media outlets, educational institutions and other stakeholders working to counter disinformation through fact-checking, professional journalism standards, media literacy and critical thinking.¹² The Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub already works across the six economies, with country-level partners in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia,¹³ cooperating with ADN-Balkans members from EU states Greece and Bulgaria. Strengthening institutional links with Greece as an EU Member State would create an important bridge between accession-country realities and EU policy implementation, facilitating knowledge transfer, interoperability of monitoring and response mechanisms, exchange of best practices, and alignment with EU standards on democratic resilience, media freedom and information integrity. Such a model would demonstrate how Member States can act as regional multipliers of the European Democracy

⁶ [Geopolitical Perspective of Disinformation Flows in the Western Balkans; Geopolitics of Information Threats in Western Balkans](#) - Metamorphosis

⁷ [Mapping Disinformation: Report on Russian & Serbian Narratives in the media & social networks in Kosovo; Hate Speech and Disinformation during the 2025 Elections in Kosovo](#) – BIRN Kosovo & Internews Kosova

⁸ [Digital Rights Violations Annual Report 2025: Monitoring Methodology](#) - BIRN

⁹ [Media Literacy Index 2026](#) – Open Society Institute Sofia

¹⁰ [European Democracy Shield](#) – EC

¹¹ [Stronger measures to protect our democracy and civil society](#) – EC

¹² [About the ADN-Balkans Network](#) – Antidisinfo.net

¹³ [Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub](#) – Antidisinfo.net

Shield and contribute to reducing the current gap between EU situational awareness and developments in neighbouring accession regions.

Integrating the region into EDMO's situational awareness function

EDMO is a central EU instrument for countering disinformation. The [Commission describes EDMO](#) as supporting an independent cross-border community of fact-checkers, academic researchers and relevant stakeholders, linking them with media organisations, media literacy experts and policy makers.¹⁴ The Commission has also confirmed that [EDMO's new phase will extend its mandate](#) to develop independent monitoring and analytical capabilities to support situational awareness, particularly during elections and crises.¹⁵

This expanded situational awareness function must include the Western Balkans. EDMO's network now includes 15 hubs, covering the whole EU and beyond, and the Commission has already supported expansion beyond the EU through the [FACT hub for Ukraine and Moldova](#).¹⁶ The Western Balkans should be the next structured enlargement-region track. This would close a strategic gap between EU disinformation monitoring and the realities of an accession region where EU credibility, democratic resilience and foreign influence are contested every day.

Importantly, inclusion must preserve independence. EDMO's credibility rests on its independence from public authorities and its governance safeguards for editorial independence. A Western Balkans EDMO track should therefore be built around independent, vetted, local-language civil society, media, research and fact-checking actors, not government-controlled structures.

Policy recommendations

1. Formally associate the Western Balkans with the European Centre for Democratic Resilience.

The [European Centre for Democratic Resilience](#) should establish a Western Balkans workstream involving DG ENEST, DG CONNECT, EEAS, relevant Commission services, and independent regional stakeholders through the stakeholder platform. This would operationalise the Centre's stated role of improving situational awareness, early warning and rapid response to FIMI and disinformation.¹⁷

2. Create a Western Balkans EDMO hub

DG CONNECT and EDMO should launch a structured Western Balkans access pathway as a dedicated EDMO regional hub. The model should cover Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, with full respect for local-language and minority-language information environments.

3. Connect regional early-warning data to EU situational awareness

The Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub's "Disinfo Radar" is already an early-warning product based on continuous media monitoring and assessment of flashpoint events likely to fuel

¹⁴ [European Digital Media Observatory – EDMO](#) – EC

¹⁵ [European Digital Media Observatory continues its activities](#) – EC

¹⁶ [New European Digital Media Observatory hub fights disinformation in Ukraine and Moldova](#) - EC

¹⁷ [European Centre for Democratic Resilience](#)

disinformation.¹⁸ Its findings should feed, through transparent and rights-respecting protocols, into EDMO's analytical work, the European Centre for Democratic Resilience, EEAS FIMI analysis and relevant DG ENEST enlargement monitoring. This should also cover election-related manipulation, diaspora-relevant information flows, foreign influence operations, media-literacy vulnerabilities and digital-rights violations.

4. Use existing EU funding architecture

All six Western Balkans economies are associated to the Digital Europe Programme, creating a practical funding basis for regional participation in EDMO-related and Democracy Shield-related initiatives. DG ENEST also manages IPA III and the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, while supporting [democratic consolidation](#),¹⁹ [EU values, stability and security](#).²⁰ These instruments should be coordinated with Digital Europe and democracy-support funding to support independent monitoring, media literacy, research access, journalist safety and election-integrity work.

5. Build safeguards against politicisation

Western Balkans inclusion must be based on independence, transparency, methodological rigour, data protection, editorial freedom and civil society participation. The aim should be to strengthen democratic resilience, not to create state-controlled counter-disinformation bodies.

Conclusion

The Western Balkans Six are part of Europe's democratic resilience challenge and part of its democratic future. Excluding them from the operational architecture of the EU Democracy Shield would leave a strategic blind spot in Europe's response to FIMI, election manipulation and anti-democratic influence. Including them would strengthen enlargement credibility, improve EU situational awareness, protect the integrity of public debate and give practical meaning to the EU's whole-of-society approach to democracy.

The Anti-Disinformation Network for the Balkans therefore urges DG ENEST, DG CONNECT, the EEAS and the European Commission to ensure that the Western Balkans Six are formally embedded in the European Centre for Democratic Resilience and connected to the EDMO ecosystem as a matter of democratic security, enlargement policy and European strategic interest. At the same time, the Network encourages the development of structured cooperation mechanisms with interested EU Member States, including Greece and Bulgaria, in order to reinforce interoperability, situational awareness and the long-term sustainability of democratic resilience efforts across South-East Europe.

¹⁸ [Disinfo Radar: Watch and Warn, covering May 2026](#) – Antidisinfo.net

¹⁹ [EU and Western Balkans advance Digital Transformation through the 3rd Regulatory Dialogue](#) - EC

²⁰ [Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood](#) - EC

Impressum

Title: Position Paper: Bringing the Western Balkans into the EU Democracy Shield and the EDMO Ecosystem



Publisher: Metamorphosis Foundation for Internet and Society
ul. Ruzveltova br. 19, kat 2, 1000 Skopje,
Republic of North Macedonia

For the publisher: Bardhyl Jashari

Editors: Bardhyl Jashari, Filip Stojanovski

Number of copies: electronic edition, available via
www.metamorphosis.org.mk and antidisinfo.net.

Skopje 2026



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