



Department for
Business & Trade

Policy paper

Chair's conclusions of the Western Balkans economic ministerial conference, 16 October 2025

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On 16 October 2025, the UK's Secretary of State for Business and Trade hosted ministers of economic affairs or designated representatives from:

- the Western Balkan Six (WB6) – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia
- friends of the Berlin Process – Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, and Slovenia

He also hosted representatives from the European Union (EU), associations of trade and industry, and international and regional organisations, in London to attend the Economy Ministers' meeting and the Business Forum of the Berlin Process.

Improving regional connectivity

1. Improving regional connectivity is important to all European partners. The participants welcome investment into infrastructure in the region from both the UK and the EU. The EU budget is providing more than 37 billion euros to the region under the current multiannual framework, in addition to bilateral support provided by the individual member states. Complementing this, the UK government has the capacity to mobilise up to £24 billion to support strategic projects that promote regional prosperity and strengthen economic security.

2. Partnership agreements were recognised as a key mechanism for facilitating investment and accelerating the delivery of critical infrastructure projects. The UK-North Macedonia government-to-government (G2G) agreement was highlighted as a leading example of what is possible in the region, demonstrating the value the UK can bring. Through this agreement, the UK is providing a comprehensive package of support and technical assistance, sharing cutting-edge innovations and expertise drawn from both government and industry. It reflects the UK's commitment to supporting regional development and showcases the practical impact of working towards shared objectives.

3. The participants underlined the importance of advancing mobility and recognition of professional qualifications, committing to swiftly conclude technical consultations for pending decisions. They welcomed the adoption of the decision on statistics and noted progress on trust services and digital cooperation, expected to enable paperless trade, accelerate digital transactions, and increase efficiency for businesses and public administrations.

4. The participants welcomed the progress on the Agreement on Access to Higher Education and Admission to Study (AHEAS), noting its ratification

and entry into force in 4 WB6 signatories and calling on the remaining signatories to expedite their ratifications. They also endorsed the Declaration on the Coordination of Social Security Systems and Portability of Rights in the Western Balkans Six, affirming principles and actions to enhance portability of social rights, including pensions and healthcare, and to improve access to services for mobile professionals.

Common Regional Market: supporting EU accession

5. The participants welcomed the progress in advancing the Common Regional Market 2025 to 2028 (CRM 2.0) and acknowledged that realising the full benefits of this project requires the wholehearted political and technical commitment of all. They acknowledged the key role of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) secretariat, commending their contribution to the economic outcomes of this year's Berlin Process and their support to the host in organising this economic ministerial, the Business Forum in London, and being a supportive partner in delivering the Green Ministerial and Digital Summit.

6. The participants noted that such progress is already easing business operations, facilitating trade in services and mobility, and advancing convergence with the EU Single Market.

7. The participants welcomed ongoing steps to streamline trade procedures, noting in particular advances in mutual recognition of conformity assessment and the roll-out of Authorised Economic Operator programmes. They also welcomed the CEFTA advisory body for customs cooperation on tariff classification and rules of origin, as well as progress on the CEFTA Customs Risk Management Strategy 2025 to 2028. In addition, the CEFTA Systematic Exchange of Electronic Data (SEED+) system was highlighted as a concrete example of regional interoperability, demonstrating how real-time data exchange among all customs and inspection administrations across CEFTA reduces waiting times, facilitates trade, and supports alignment with EU standards.

8. The participants recalled the adoption of Additional Protocol 7 on Dispute Settlement in October 2024 that establishes a predictable, rules-based, efficient, and transparent dispute resolution mechanism and committed to start the process of ratification and approval procedures to ensure its swift entry into force.

Sustainable growth

9. The participants endorsed the Whitelist of the Sustainable Finance Taxonomy for the Western Balkans Six and the Western Balkans Six Green Bond Standard as key tools to support the mobilisation of finance for the green transition and advance sustainability objectives in the region. They further endorsed the Joint Call for Action on Gender-Responsive Green Finance to strengthen women's access, inclusion and empowerment in the green transition, and encouraged the implementation of the Regional Financial Literacy Framework for Individuals as a common basis for strengthening financial education, including in areas of sustainable finance, across the WB6.

Sustainable investment

10. The participants endorsed the Recommendation on Sustainable Foreign Direct Investment in the Western Balkans Six and the Regional Model Clauses on Sustainability to enhance the region's attractiveness to quality foreign direct investment (FDI) and maximise its contribution to sustainable development, noting also the accompanying Sustainable FDI Policy Toolkit as a practical instrument for implementation. They also agreed on the Joint Principles for Investment Facilitation in the Western Balkans Six, the first regionally agreed framework for streamlining procedures, enhancing transparency and reducing barriers to investment.

Sustainable industry and tourism

11. The participants endorsed the Joint Statement on Regional Green Public Procurement (GPP) criteria in the WB6, calling for their use to integrate environmental considerations into procurement and drive industrial transformation towards green competitiveness. Recognising the importance of a unified regional tourism identity for strengthening visibility and competitiveness, the ministers endorsed the Declaration on Western Balkans Tourism Branding and pledged to establish a regional fund to promote the WB6 as a single destination.

Innovation

12. The participants welcomed the efforts of RCC to establish a Regional Online Matchmaking Platform for Research and Innovation Infrastructures to unlock regional potential and foster cooperation across sectors. They supported the launch of a Regional Innovation for Startup Excellence (RISE) mechanism to position the WB6 as a hub for future-ready technologies while fostering early-stage innovation and addressing ecosystem gaps.

Digital

13. The participants of the Western Balkans Digital Summit reaffirmed a joint commitment to secure, transparent, innovative, and stronger regional digitalisation, fully connected within the region and with the wider European and global digital community. They endorsed a Joint Statement on a Digitally Connected WB6, advancing efforts and activities that strengthen digital connectivity in the region, including aligning with the EU roaming acquis aiming to achieve Roam Like at Home with the EU.

Participants also committed to a Joint Statement on Achieving WB6 Interoperable Digital Identity Wallets and Trust Services, aiming to achieve regional Digital ID Wallets and trust service interoperability across the WB6 and with the EU. They welcomed the Regional Digital Identity Interoperability Platform to advance dialogue and coordination on digital identity and trust services. Participants undertook to enhance operational cooperation with the EU Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) also welcomed the Cyber Security Database as a tool to identify regional needs, reinforce dialogue and better coordinate donor engagement. Participants underscored the importance of alignment with the EU Digital Services Act (DSA), Digital Markets Act (DMA), and the EU Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act, committing to developing a regional framework on AI, based on EU policy and practice.

Inclusive growth

Creative economy

14. The participants acknowledged the increasing significance of the creative economy in driving inclusive growth, social cohesion, and regional cooperation. They committed to establishing shared definitions and data frameworks for creative economies across the region, and to strengthening collaboration between Ministries of Culture, Education, and Economy.

Youth participation

15. The participants recognised the call for increased access to finance, training, and regional start-up networks, as well as inclusive labour-market reforms to close socioeconomic gaps. Special emphasis was placed on linking education with labour market needs, to prevent mismatches that continue to drive youth unemployment and emigration, and to improve youth participation in the economy.

Roma inclusion

16. The participants recognised Roma inclusion as a strategic driver of inclusive economic growth. Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to increasing Roma employment and labour market participation, with a particular focus on women, formal employment, and entrepreneurship. Participants acknowledged that creating 66,000 formal jobs for Roma would be needed for Roma to reach equal participation in the labour market.

Civil society

17. The participants noted the crucial role of civil society organisations in strengthening the monitoring of the CRM. Noting the Civil Society Forum's recommendation that governments enforce and institutionalise CRM commitments, harmonise policies to remove protectionist barriers, engage the private sector with a focus on digital transformation, facilitate free movement by recognising qualifications, and increase transparency by involving civil society in monitoring and reporting.

Women's economic empowerment

18. The participants re-affirmed their commitment to institutionalising women's economic empowerment as an accelerator and enabler of economic security and growth across the region. Despite comprising half the potential workforce, women in the region face systemic barriers to economic participation. Addressing these issues – by ensuring fair working conditions, promoting women's leadership, and integrating women's perspectives into policymaking – will significantly enhance regional stability, governance, and economic growth.

19. The participants endorsed a new Women's Economic Empowerment Call to Action, with commitments to support women-led small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and expand their access to finance and invest in the care economy and support families to thrive by addressing the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women. In support of this, the UK announced £1 million globally for TransformCare, which addresses care inequalities and enables women to engage more fully in economic life, including in the Western Balkans.

Business Forum

20. The participants welcomed recommendations from the WB6 Business and Chambers Forum held in Belgrade on 7 October 2025, acknowledging the importance of the WB6 Chambers of Commerce and the coordination role of the WB6 Chamber Investment Forum. A report, produced by UK academics, helped inform ministerial-level decision-making on advancing economic integration and unlocking opportunities for greater regional trade. This supports the CRM agenda and the region's EU accession efforts.

21. As part of improving the business environment, a business forum was held alongside the Economy Ministers' Meeting. This event brought together companies active in or seeking to expand into the Western Balkans. A panel discussion, chaired by RCC featured representatives from regional investment promotion agencies and UK Export Finance (UKEF) to highlight investment opportunities and collaboration. It served as a platform for dialogue between business and government, highlighting the region's potential and the need for continued reforms to attract sustainable investment. A second panel discussion, chaired by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) featured representatives from the Energy Community Secretariat, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), World Bank, the WB6 and the private sector to

discuss opportunities for accelerating the clean energy transition in the region.

Opportunities for investment related to the energy transition

22. On 14 October 2025, participants of the Second Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB) Ministerial Meeting reaffirmed their shared commitment to the green transition through the endorsement of the Dubrovnik Declaration and the Revised GAWB Action Plan (2025 to 2030). They also endorsed the WB6 Climate Adaptation Roadmap, marking an important step toward a Regional Adaptation Strategy, and the Regional Action Plan on Plastic Pollution Prevention Including Marine Litter, reinforcing joint efforts to advance circular economy and environmental protection in the WB6. They agreed to attend a UK-convened expert level roundtable to discuss carbon leakage and trade.

23. At the economic ministerial, ministers acknowledged the importance of regional cooperation and international support in ensuring a just and equitable energy transition, and encouraged further investment in renewable energy, energy efficiency, and green infrastructure. They agreed to attend a UK-convened expert level roundtable to discuss policies to mitigate carbon leakage.

Closing remarks

24. The participants expressed their appreciation to the host country and reaffirmed their commitment to the Berlin Process as a platform for dialogue, cooperation, and progress. They underscored the importance of the Common Regional Market and regional solidarity in advancing the Western Balkans' path to EU integration.

25. The chair wishes to thank all participants for their constructive engagement and continued dedication to sustainable economic development and regional stability.



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