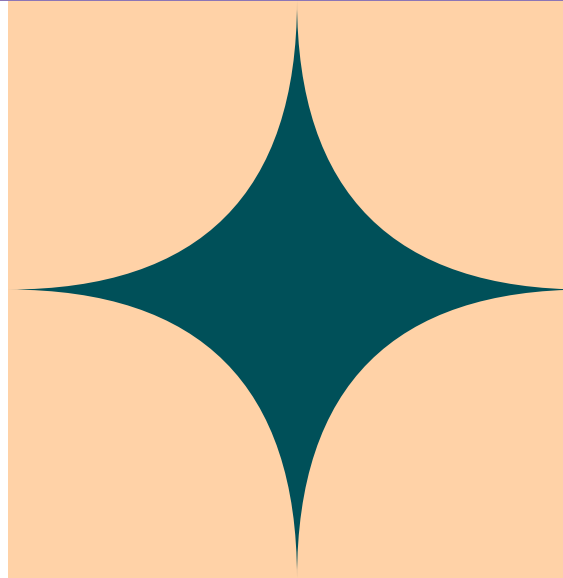


EU-Balkan Observatory
SNAPSHOTS



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PROGRESS ON CLIMATE ACTION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: A REVIEW OF EVIDENCE BASED ON NDC-VNR ANALYSIS

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The EU's ambitious goal to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, in line with the 2015 Paris Agreement, depends on both internal efforts and cooperation with neighboring countries. The Western Balkans, in particular, can play an important role in accelerating the EU's climate aspirations. Given growing international pressure for climate action in this region, the study assesses whether countries demonstrate political will for climate change action and possess the capacity to fulfill their climate commitments. It also aims to identify specific policy measures, challenges, and capacity needs. Based on desktop research and qualitative content analysis of publicly available documents—specifically, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—this paper provides new insights into the region's progress in implementing international climate agreements. The findings from five countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) indicate a renewed commitment by governments to align with global sustainability goals and to implement the necessary reforms for climate mitigation and adaptation. However, except for Albania, the region struggles to meet its 2030 climate targets. Despite advancements in the legislative, policy, and institutional frameworks, critical gaps persist in: 1) aligning national legislation with international standards and implementing policies; 2) addressing deficits in human, technical, institutional, and financial capacities; and 3) raising public awareness of climate issues. Given the crucial role of international assistance in advancing climate action in the region, mobilizing further efforts relies on greater cooperation and involvement from international organizations (IOs). While expert interviews could complement and validate these findings, expanding the research sample to include Eastern Balkan and Central European countries would enable broader comparisons in the context of EU membership. Further research is needed to understand IOs's role in capacity building and to assess the effectiveness of related programs and projects.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVE

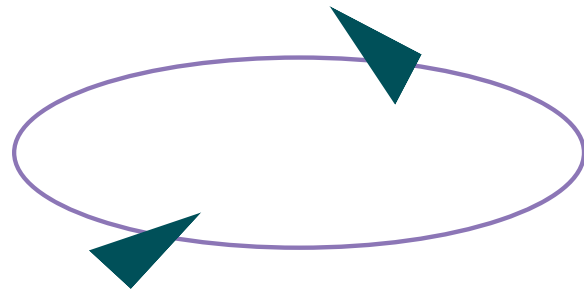
A state of climate emergency has been increasingly declared by scientists, activists, and governments over the past two decades. Despite early warnings and the 2015 Paris Agreement goal to limit global temperature rise, progress has been slow. In this context, the effective implementation of climate policies is a growing global concern. The European Union (EU) has set an aspirational goal to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, requiring coordinated efforts not only within but also beyond EU borders. The Western Balkans, in particular, play a crucial role in supporting and advancing these climate ambitions.

The term "Western Balkans" typically refers to six countries in Southern and Eastern Europe covered by the EU enlargement policy (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia). The region is one of Europe's top air pollution hotspots mainly due to outdated coal power plants and old vehicles, with transboundary pollution affecting neighboring EU countries (EEA 2024; CEE Bankwatch Network 2023; UNEP 2021; COM 2020). It is also highly vulnerable to climate change, with significant temperature increases projected (RCC 2018). This dual challenge calls for accelerated action to combat climate change and its impacts in the region.

Despite the Western Balkans' growing role in international climate commitments and potential impact on the European Green Deal (Knez et al. 2022), the region has received limited attention in climate policy research. As candidates for EU membership, parties to the UNFCCC and Paris Agreement, and signatories to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the countries have pledged to climate action. Yet, it remains unclear whether they genuinely intend to deliver on their promises and if they have the practical ability to meet their climate targets. This study aims to assess the region's prospects for achieving climate targets by 2030 and identify progress, challenges, and capacity needs in the field of climate policy.

METHODOLOGY

The potential for reaching the climate targets by 2030 is assessed based on current trends using data from the Enhanced NDCs and the World Bank. The study further employs a qualitative approach to explore progress and challenges in climate action in the region through document analysis, building on the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). Although VNRs are government-led and not necessarily independent and unbiased, they can effectively complement the analysis of the NDCs, focusing particularly on SDG 13 on climate action. Data from both documents are combined to summarize the key insights on the progress made (measures and good practices), as well as the barriers and capacity needs faced by the countries in Western Balkans. The present study focuses on five countries recognized as EU membership candidates: Albania (2014), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2022), Montenegro (2010), North Macedonia (2005), and Serbia (2012). Kosovo is excluded from the analysis as it has not officially submitted a VNR or NDC



FINDINGS

Despite increased climate change mitigation ambitions, most countries are falling behind their climate targets, except for Albania, which has already exceeded its GHG reduction goal (see Fig. 1). Additional measures are needed to meet their targets by 2030. While the EU has shown a consistent decline in emissions since 2005, the Western Balkans have a slower pace of GHG reductions, where binding reduction targets were only recently introduced.

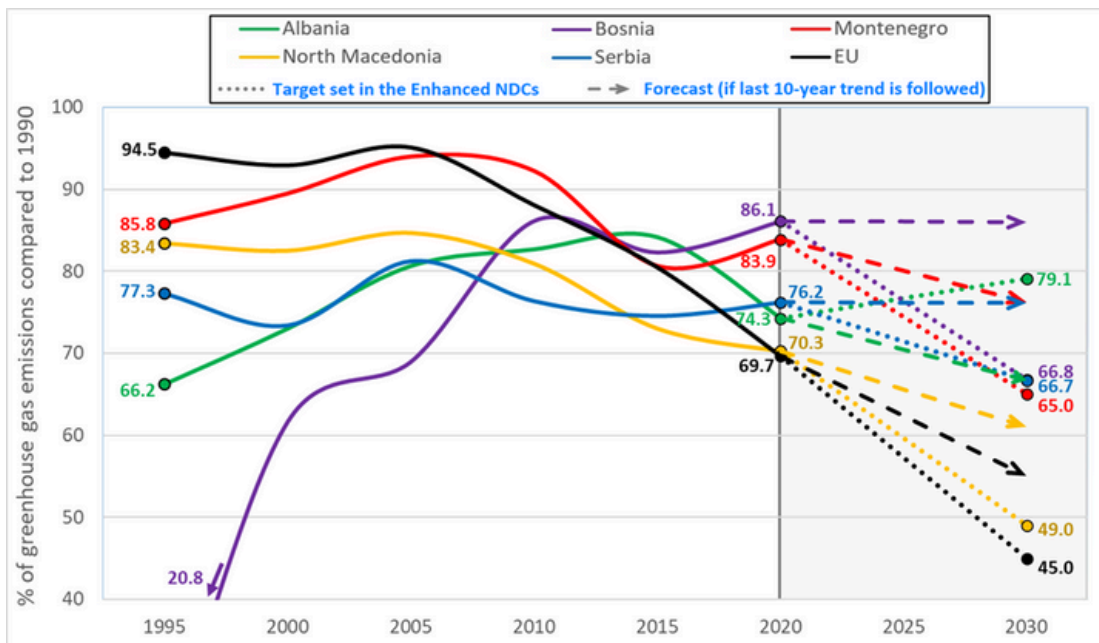


Fig. 1. Progress in achieving the Climate Reduction Targets set by countries in the Western Balkans based on the Enhanced NDCs (% of GHG emissions compared to the baseline year 1990), Source: World Bank (own calculations)

POLITICAL COMMITMENT


The document analysis points to a strong political will for complying with international agreements relating to the Paris agreement, the 2030 Agenda, and the EU accession process. Moreover, these processes are seen as interwoven and complementary. As countries work towards EU accession, they also advance the SDGs, with notable synergies between the two agendas. Many SDG targets are strongly linked to EU policies and acquis chapters, especially in areas like the environment, rule of law, and social policy. Some of the NDCs establish a connection to the 2030 Agenda, noting that there are more synergies than trade-offs between the Paris Agreement and the Global Goals.

ACTION TO COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE

In the Western Balkans, the enhanced NDCs cover a broader range of sectors, including energy, industry, transport, waste management, and agriculture, with focus on land use and forestry when data is available. The region has started developing greenhouse gas inventories based on IPCC methodology, focusing on CO₂, CH₄, N₂O, and HFCs. Implementation approaches vary, with significant progress in legislative and institutional frameworks, including Serbia's new climate law and Albania's moratorium on forest clearing. New climate coordination mechanisms have been established in Albania and Montenegro, while North Macedonia assigned new responsibilities for preparing GHG inventor and climate research.

While climate change policy in the Western Balkans has traditionally focused on mitigation, there is now a noticeable shift towards adaptation in the enhanced NDCs. North Macedonia plans to incorporate adaptation strategies in future reports, while Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have strengthened their efforts following the severe impacts of climate change over the past decade. National adaptation plans now include early warning systems, infrastructure improvements, and changes in agricultural practices. The adoption of local adaptation strategies has been generally slow, yet some good practices can be found, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina's 'Vrbas River Basin' project on flood protection across nine local government units.

AThe Green Climate Fund supports projects in the Western Balkans to advance climate policy, such as Montenegro's initiative to develop a national adaptation plan and North Macedonia's program to enhance stakeholder engagement. Young people across the region are becoming more active, urging governments to prioritize climate change and include it in formal education. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Feminist Action for Climate Justice Action Coalition represents good practice in promoting social dialogue and equal participation of girls and women in climate decision-making..



Challenges and Recommendations

The analysis identifies three main challenges for climate action in the Western Balkans.

- First, there are legislative and policy shortcomings, as stronger political will and better national ownership are needed to achieve NDC targets and align with international regulations, including the EU climate acquis.
- Second, insufficient human, technical, institutional, and financial capacities hinder progress, emphasizing the need for further international support and capacity development.
- Third, limited public awareness of climate change restricts climate action, making climate education and greater inclusion of women in decision-making crucial. Raising public awareness and securing alternative funding sources, beyond reliance on donors, are critical for success.

Conclusions and Outlook for Future Research

The Western Balkans have a growing role in mitigating climate change and improving Europe's environmental state. In the face of heightened risk perception and urgency, the region is under increasing international pressure to adopt more climate-related policies. The qualitative content analysis of the NDCs and VNRs of five countries in the region (including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia) revealed renewed political commitment to international climate agreements, the UN 2030 Agenda and EU accession. However, despite increased climate ambitions in the Enhanced NDCs, the Western Balkans are not on track to meet their climate targets by 2030. If current trends continue, all countries (except for Albania) will miss their unconditional climate targets. Document analysis further shows significant advancements in the legislative, policy, and institutional frameworks, yet fundamental shortcomings remain in implementing new laws and policies, developing human, technical, and financial capacities, and raising public awareness of climate change. Thus, meeting the 2030 climate targets depends on additional national measures and international support to provide the necessary capacities and resources for effective climate action. In view of the limited time available for meeting the ambitious SDGs and Paris goals, it is crucial for countries to adopt a approach to implementation by linking up institutional, policy, financial, and monitoring instruments and frameworks that support their implementation (cf. Bouyé et al. 2018).

Given the central role of international assistance in the region, future research should focus on the role of international organizations (e.g., EU, UN) and multilateral/bilateral cooperation and the effectiveness of their programs in strengthening transformative capacities for climate action. In addition to political commitment and economic underdevelopment, placing greater emphasis on the capacity factor in climate research could yield valuable insights into the reasons for (non)compliance with international agreements in the Western Balkans. For the countries seeking EU accession, harmonizing national laws with EU legislation and meeting EU climate targets are critical, making it essential for assessing progress in implementing the Green Agenda in the Western Balkans.

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