



Civil Society & Think Tank Forum Prishtina 2026

Policy Recommendations

Digital Transformation, AI and Digital Sovereignty

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1 Introduction

Anchor the Western Balkans' digital sovereignty in rights- and evidence-based governance, capable institutions, accountable technology companies, and full participation in EU digital and democracy mechanisms.

Context:

Digital transformation is becoming one of the defining policy areas shaping the future of the Western Balkans and its European integration. As WB6 prepare for EU membership, they are expected not only to align with the evolving European digital acquis, including the AI Act, Digital Services Act (DSA), Digital Markets Act (DMA), and GDPR, but also to develop the institutional, technical, and human capacities necessary to implement these frameworks effectively. At the same time, the rapid development and deployment of artificial intelligence (AI), increasing dependence on global technology companies, evolving data governance challenges, and growing risks to human rights and democratic processes require a comprehensive approach to digital governance that goes beyond formal legislative alignment.

For the Western Balkans, digital sovereignty should not be understood as technological self-sufficiency or control of the national digital space. Rather, it should be pursued through strengthening the region's capacity to make democratic and informed choices about its data, digital infrastructure and technologies, while aligning with European frameworks, respecting human rights, and becoming an active participant in European digital governance and the Digital Single Market. Achieving this requires operational readiness, trusted data governance, responsible AI governance, effective accountability of technology companies, stronger regional cooperation, and sustained investment in institutional, research and innovation capacities, human capital and digital skills.

2 Progress Check & Key Challenges

Progress on previous recommendations:

These recommendations build on priorities identified through previous CSF processes, particularly the 2023 recommendations on digitalisation and connectivity, as well as the 2024 and 2025 recommendations on digital governance, cybersecurity, disinformation and democratic resilience. Across these cycles, common priorities have included gradual integration into the European digital ecosystem, regional coordination, multi-stakeholder governance, alignment with the EU digital acquis, digital literacy and stronger engagement with global technology companies.

Since then, progress across the Western Balkans has remained uneven and has focused primarily on legislative alignment as a way of meeting EU accession criteria. While the EU Growth Plan and national Reform Agendas have created additional momentum for digital reforms by introducing commitments related to digital public services, digital identity, connectivity, and digital skills, many of these commitments are still at an early stage of implementation. Meaningful participation of civil society and independent experts, structured engagement with global technology companies, and investment in institutional and human capacities have largely remained limited and inconsistent.

Key challenges and current context:

Despite growing recognition of digital transformation as a strategic priority, the Western Balkans continue to face significant governance and implementation challenges. Progress towards the EU digital acquis remains uneven across the region, with varying levels of institutional preparedness and administrative capacity. While some countries have initiated legislative reforms, strategic planning and implementation roadmaps, others have yet to establish comprehensive digital governance frameworks. A further challenge is ensuring that policy commitments are accompanied by clear responsibilities, measurable objectives, and mechanisms for monitoring progress and accountability.

Across the region, institutional capacities remain constrained by limited expertise, weak coordination and insufficient investment in digital skills, research and innovation. Public administrations require greater capacity to implement emerging digital legislation, while civil society, academia and independent experts are not yet systematically involved in policymaking, implementation and oversight. At the same time, AI and other digital technologies are increasingly influencing democratic processes, and public services, while the deployment of surveillance technologies, biometric systems and data-driven tools has, in some cases, outpaced the development of appropriate safeguards, raising concerns about privacy, data protection and transparency.

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These challenges are inherently regional. Strengthening national coordination and regional cooperation and progressively integrating the Western Balkans into European digital governance and democratic resilience mechanisms, are essential to ensuring that digital transformation contributes to democratic resilience, the protection of rights, competitiveness and successful EU integration.

3 Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Ensure evidence-based and implementation-ready digital governance frameworks with clear institutional mandates

Addressed to: Western Balkan governments, European Commission

Context: Digital transformation presents the Western Balkans with an opportunity to strengthen innovation and progress towards the EU Digital Single Market, while also posing significant challenges for democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law. As candidate and potential candidate countries, WB6 are expected to progressively align with the evolving EU digital acquis. However, effective digital governance cannot be reduced to legislative alignment alone. It requires conducive institutional arrangements, meaningful and inclusive public consultations, strategic planning and evidence-based policymaking informed by assessments of implementation capacities, human rights implications and other potential risks. It also requires practical EU support, including clearer written guidance on the technical aspects of implementing the digital acquis.

Ask: By the end of 2028, WB governments should adopt digital governance frameworks that are based on maturity, risk and human rights impact assessments, developed with meaningful involvement of civil society, academia, independent experts and the private sector. Frameworks should clearly assign institutional responsibilities for implementation, and give functionally independent bodies the mandate for oversight and enforcement, supported by adequate resources and capacities (as set out in Recommendation 4).

By 2027, the European Commission should complement legislative alignment support with practical implementation guidance to support the consistent implementation of the EU digital acquis across WB6.

Recommendation 2: Ground AI governance and deployment in human rights

Addressed to: Western Balkan governments

Context: As AI is increasingly developed and deployed across sectors, governance frameworks should ensure transparency, accountability, public trust and the responsible use of AI, while protecting fundamental rights and addressing impacts on workers, employment and working conditions. Human rights-based AI governance requires a cross-sectoral approach, supported by trusted data governance, independent oversight, rights-based impact assessments, accessible complaint and redress mechanisms, sector-specific codes and guidelines, and meaningful opportunities for civil society and other independent actors to monitor AI deployment and hold public and private actors accountable. The WB6 share a common normative framework through the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, which provides an important reference for embedding human rights, democracy and the rule of law into AI governance and deployment. Yet, although some WB6 countries have signed it, none has yet ratified the Convention.

Ask: By 2028, the WB6 CoE member states should ratify the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and adopt comprehensive, cross-sectoral national AI governance frameworks and implementing legislation consistent with its principles, and ensure effective human rights-based safeguards, independent oversight and mechanisms for civil society monitoring and accountability across the development, deployment and use of AI.

Recommendation 3: Protect democratic processes from digital and AI-enabled threats through closer cooperation with the EU

Addressed to: European Commission, Western Balkan governments

Context: An important dimension of digital sovereignty is the capacity to identify and respond to digital risks affecting democratic processes and to exercise meaningful oversight over the technologies and online platforms shaping the information environment. This requires not only appropriate domestic governance frameworks, but also access to data, expertise, cooperation mechanisms and effective channels through which public authorities, civil society and researchers can demand transparency and hold technology companies accountable.

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These capacities are increasingly important as digital and AI-enabled risks to democratic processes evolve. The growing use of AI-generated disinformation, deepfakes and synthetic media during elections and political crises poses new risks to public trust, electoral integrity and democratic participation, with women in politics and public life disproportionately exposed to AI-enabled harassment and manipulated content.

Western Balkan countries currently have limited access to relevant EU-level mechanisms and resources. The European Democracy Shield provides an opportunity to address this gap by extending relevant instruments and cooperation mechanisms to candidate and potential candidate countries and strengthening their links with EU frameworks on AI governance, platform accountability and election integrity.

Participation in European digital governance mechanisms also requires appropriate national coordination structures and clearly designated institutions capable of engaging with EU counterparts. As candidate and potential candidate countries, the WB6 would benefit from clearer guidance from the European Commission on the institutional arrangements, coordination protocols and other operational requirements necessary to participate effectively in these mechanisms.

Ask: The European Commission should use the European Democracy Shield and related EU digital governance mechanisms to strengthen the capacity of Western Balkan countries to respond to digital risks affecting democratic processes, by systematically including relevant stakeholders in cooperation mechanisms, expert networks and initiatives related to AI governance, platform accountability, election integrity and digital resilience. This should include providing practical guidance on the institutional arrangements, coordination protocols and operational requirements for candidate and potential candidate countries to participate effectively in these mechanisms; facilitating structured engagement with online platforms; and enabling researchers and other qualified public-interest actors from the region to access relevant platform data, datasets, computing infrastructure, analytical tools and other resources necessary for independent research and evidence-based oversight.

Western Balkan governments should, in turn, designate adequately resourced institutions to cooperate with EU counterparts under the European Democracy Shield, and actively seek inclusion in its structures, instruments and expert networks. They should put safeguards in place so that oversight powers are not used against independent media, civil society or legitimate political speech.

Berlin Process Summit ask: Parties should commit to the full participation of all six Western Balkan partners in the European Democracy Shield and endorse a dedicated “Western Balkans and the European Democracy Shield” implementation annex to the Leaders’ Declaration. Among

others, this should also outline how Western Balkan authorities, civil society and researchers can join its work on AI-enabled manipulation and platform accountability.

Recommendation 4: Ensure operational readiness by strengthening national coordination, institutional capacities, and digital and AI literacy

Addressed to: Western Balkan governments, civil society, academic, educational and research institutions

Context: Effective digital transformation depends on strong institutional, technical and human capacities, supported by effective national coordination. Across the region, public institutions often lack the expertise, resources and coordination mechanisms needed to implement digital governance frameworks, while investment in research and innovation remains limited. Institutional weaknesses and low public trust increase the region's vulnerability to digital and AI-enabled threats, which is why resilient, trustworthy and functionally independent institutions should be recognised as an essential component of digital sovereignty. At the same time, digital, media and AI literacy remains insufficient across society, while civil society and academia require stronger monitoring and oversight capacities to support evidence-based policymaking and accountability. While Recommendation 1 addresses how digital governance frameworks are designed and which institutions they mandate, this recommendation focuses on the coordination, resources and capacities needed for their effective implementation.

Ask: Western Balkan governments should establish national coordination mechanisms for digital governance, bringing together relevant sectoral institutions and stakeholders, and ensure that institutions responsible for implementation and oversight have sustained funding, specialised staff and technical expertise. They should also ensure sustainable support for digital, media and AI literacy, and mainstream these across the education system, including in school curricula and public administration capacity building. At the same time, research, innovation and independent monitoring should be strengthened through stable funding and effective participation mechanisms.

Civil society, academia, and educational and research institutions should actively engage in these mechanisms, strengthen their own expertise and capacities, and contribute to research, monitoring, literacy initiatives and evidence-based policymaking.

Recommendation 5: Formalise a multi-stakeholder regional coordination mechanism

Addressed to: Western Balkan governments, RCC and CEFTA

Context: Digital governance challenges increasingly transcend national borders, while fragmented national responses weaken implementation, limit knowledge exchange and reduce the region's collective influence in engaging with the EU and global technology companies. Regional cooperation already covers important aspects of digital transformation, including digital public services, digital skills, connectivity and alignment with the EU digital acquis. Existing initiatives, including RCC ministerial working groups on AI, DSA and DMA alignment, as well as the annual Digital Summit and CEFTA Week, provide a strong foundation for cooperation. At the same time, finding common ground at the regional level is becoming increasingly challenging. WB6 countries are at different stages of policy and regulatory development, with differing institutional arrangements, capacities and approaches to implementing European digital rules. These differences make it more difficult to develop shared positions and coordinated responses, even where countries face many of the same cross-border challenges. WB6 therefore continue to develop and implement digital governance frameworks largely in isolation, missing opportunities to exchange implementation experience, develop common approaches and strengthen the region's integration into European digital governance mechanisms. Moreover, existing regional processes do not systematically involve civil society, academia, researchers and other non-governmental stakeholders, limiting their ability to contribute evidence and independent expertise, and to monitor policymaking.

Ask: Western Balkan governments should mandate and resource a structured regional coordination mechanism for digital governance, building on existing RCC and CEFTA initiatives, with formal participation of regulators, civil society, academia, researchers and the private sector, to coordinate implementation approaches, exchange expertise and experience, and organise joint capacity-building.

The RCC, in cooperation with CEFTA, should convene the mechanism and provide secretariat support.

Berlin Process Summit ask:

Endorse the establishment of a multi-stakeholder regional coordination mechanism for digital governance and invite the RCC, in cooperation with CEFTA, to convene its first meeting by April 2027.