

South ossetia solar energy for the environment

As the European Union's enlargement to the Western Balkans is finally back on the table, aligning legislation with EU law has become a pressing necessity for the candidate countries in the region. This includes adhering to the EU Climate Law, which commits member states to achieving full decarbonisation by 2050. However, achieving significant emission reductions in the Western Balkans remain a formidable task. In 2020, some hope emerged with the EU-backed introduction of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, a plan that mirrors the ambitious European Green Deal.

While 8 out of the 9 billion Euros are grants, which implies that they don't have to be paid back, 1 billion Euros are guarantees through the Western Balkans Guarantee facility. A guarantee means that the EU does not directly lend money, but guarantees that the debt will be repaid (at least partly) should the lender default. The EU expects to mobilise 20 billion Euros of investments over the next decade through its investments and grants in the region.

Embedded within this vision is the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP), a strategic framework that promises substantial EU investments in the region of up to EUR9 billion from 2021 to 2027. These much-needed funds are vital in facilitating the region's green transition and fostering greater integration into the EU.

The amount of funding shows that the emphasis is mainly on transportation. Most money goes into sustainable transport, of which similar amounts are invested into railroads and roads. The disparity in investments is striking, with the funding allocated to roads surpassing that of clean energy by more than double.

While the Economic and Investment Plan includes various projects intended to support sustainable transportation, renewable energy, digitalisation, and private sector growth, it remains questionable whether all these investments really support the overarching goals of the Green Agenda.

A substantial amount of the EU investments also focuses on increasing energy efficiency. This is a good step to reduce emissions and air pollution, as buildings are significant contributors to emissions, particularly those with inefficient heating systems.

The current allocation of funds also falls short in addressing climate change and environmental damage comprehensively. While a few projects focus on waste and wastewater management, there is a notable neglect of other vital environmental issues. Areas such as sustainable agriculture - despite its significant impact on the region's exports and employment - currently remain excluded from the investment plan.

Western Balkan municipalities must develop the necessary capacities. Conducting comprehensive environmental impact analyses is crucial to guarantee that projects do align with the green transition.

However, their effectiveness ultimately relies on the implementation phase, making good governance practices indispensable.

NGOs also raise concerns about the lack of consultation with civil society during the planning process, highlighting a need for greater inclusion and transparency. Samir Leme? criticizes that "the process is not transparent, there is not enough information available publicly, and most of the funds are being used by consultants from the EU."

Overall, the amount of funding allocated to the Western Balkans through the EIP is comparatively small when compared to the EU funds flowing into neighboring countries like Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, and Greece. Indeed, member states benefit from many more programmes and opportunities for funding - hence the candidate countries' interest in finally accessing the EU. According to Selma Ahatovic-Lihic, "the convergence gap between the Western Balkans and the EU still remains huge."

The intersection of geopolitics adds another layer of complexity. The financial support provided by the EU through the EIP is part of the existing IPA III funding, which is specifically earmarked to aid countries in their journey towards EU accession. As a result, these investments are subject to conditionality, meaning that the amount of funding received is contingent upon the performance of each individual country.

On the other hand, for the EU to make a credible commitment to the Western Balkans, it also needs a clear perspective. "The date of Serbian accession to the EU has now been postponed indefinitely, for decades for sure," says Vu?kovi?. "Hence, any financial support by the EU institutions is regarded - to make an understatement - with a grain of salt."

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