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The Impact of Regional Organizations and Initiatives in the Western Balkans

by Nedžma Džananović, Donika Emini, Ledion Krisafi,
Ivan Nikolovski, Anamarija Velinovska

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ABBREVIATIONS

AII	Adriatic Ionian Initiative
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement
CEI	Central European Initiative
CRM	Common Regional Market
DCP	Danube Cooperation Process
DPA	Dayton Peace Accords
EU	European Union
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession
MAARI	Migration Asylum Refugees Regional Initiative
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OB(I)	Open Balkans Initiative
PCC SEE	Police Cooperation Convention in Southeast Europe
RACVIAC	Regional Arms Control Verification and Implementation Assistance Center
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
REA	Regional Economic Area

RI	Regional initiatives
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office in the Western Balkans
SAA	Stabilisation and Association Agreement
SAP	Stabilisation and Association Process
SECI	Southeast Cooperation Initiative
SEECF	South East European Cooperation Process
WB	Western Balkans
WBF	Western Balkans Fund
WB 6	Western Balkan Six

Introduction

The goals of the paper titled *The Actual Impact of Regional Organizations and Initiatives on Regional Cooperation/Integration and Good Neighborly Relations in the Western Balkans: Success and Limiting Factors* are twofold. First, it sheds light on the phenomenon on mushrooming regional organisations and initiatives in the Western Balkans against the background of ethnic disputes and the breakup of former Yugoslavia. Supported generously by the European Union and its drive to replicate its successful model of integration, some of them have contributed significantly to the re-establishment of stronger economic ties and compulsion for political cooperation especially regarding EU integration issues. However, others have been less successful and thus lost their initial rationale, but still provide opportunities to assemble the regional actors periodically. The paper will take a critical view over both, success and limiting factors and try to identify the drivers – the ways and steps through which the cooperation and

integration aspirations might be advanced and their relevance sustained, especially during the Coronavirus pandemic and post-COVID-19 recovery. Since membership in the EU is a two-way process, this paper will also examine how existing regional frameworks helped or hindered the consolidation of priorities and capacities of the Western Balkan contracting parties (WB6).

Second, the paper will assess the contribution of these regional organizations and initiatives to the overall stabilisation course of the region, namely through the lenses of reconciliation, and good neighbourly relations. Despite the generally positive impression of a trend of improvement in cooperation within the Western Balkans, some important issues have remained open for decades and very frequent diplomatic exchanges between the countries only reaffirm the importance of their resolution. The paper will elucidate how regional organisations and initiatives might optimise their impacts in these politically delicate areas and which mechanisms, instruments, and good practices they may use to enhance effectiveness.

When it comes to the structure, the paper has five chapters. The Introduction provides a context for the understanding of significance of the regional cooperation in general, the reasons why regional cooperation stands high within the European Union priorities in the region, as well as the fact that it represents a part of the conditionalities the EU has defined for the region within the enlargement process. The short history and current developments within the leading regional organisations and initiatives are explained in the second chapter. The third chapter simultaneously elaborates and summarises the experiences of individual countries in the regional cooperation thus far and provides ground for the concluding part. Because of the impact Covid-19 has on the region and its proper functioning, a specific chapter reviews the state of regional cooperation during the years of the pandemic, and tries to understanding the potential and benefits that it might bring to the regional cooperation in the WB.

The research on the basis of which a critical overview of development of regional organisations was carried out, with the

proposed recommendations, is based on a series of semi-structured interviews with the leading diplomats from the region, who are currently, or were previously, tasked with conceptualizing and implementing regional cooperation. In addition, these interviews included officials and staff of the most relevant regional organisations. Interviewees, accepted to be interviewed, on the condition of anonymity, therefore during citation the authors will reveal only their position and institution. The research was conducted in the summer 2021.

1. Conceptualising regional cooperation

Regional diplomacy is a form of multi-lateral diplomacy practiced in proximate groups which come together on a different basis – mostly, but not exclusively, geography. The definition of a region has its geographical dimension but relies ultimately on the political identification and interpretation of economic, social, environmental or identity components of the participating states.

Regional diplomacy has the power to transform the neighbourhood relations and paradigms. When it works, such cooperation produces a dynamic momentum that opens the door to numerous possibilities¹. In some cases, regional organizations can even play key roles in the resolution of conflicts. Regional organizations differ in the manner and reasons for their establishment, and the level and ways of their institutionalization, even if they cover the same region, since they can have a significant centripetal role at a polit-

ical and international level, as well as in the context of concrete and specific issues.

The achieved level of cooperation can be transferred to other domains and contexts (e.g. homogenous activity within another, bigger international organization), while successful practices and models can influence the establishment of a similar format in other parts of the world.

As levels of integration and activity differ, Rana² offers the following typology of regional groups:

- **Well integrated** (that legislates for its members on a number of issues. Member-states are the key actors and integration has its progression, but also its limits);
- **Advanced** (when the long-established cooperation extends to a roadmap for the future growth, but without an integration agenda. Serious bilateral disputes among members are precluded with major issues resolved);
- **Medium intensity** (where some have a long history but have not met their own expectations, usually due to unre-

¹ Kishan S. Rana, *21st-Century Diplomacy: A Practitioner's Guide* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011).

² Kishan S. Rana, *21st-Century Diplomacy: A Practitioner's Guide* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011).

solved issues among member-states. Good intentions do exist, but a solid basis for cooperation is absent);

- **Nascent or aspirational** (the type of organizations with aspirations that exceed their performance, either because it is evolving or due to internal blocks. It is common for this type to have a vision of mutual gains, but not to a point where it becomes a driving force);
- **Dormant** (organizations with a weak unifying force, initial vision offset by other factors, lack of strong drivers, disinterested members and often lost rationale).

Regional organisations are an integral part of the contemporary international relations, and virtually every state is a member of at least several of them. They encourage dialogue and cooperation between states and economies, thus providing an arena for such dialogue. In a wider context, they contribute to a substitution of the bilateral model with the multilateral one, within one region. That, however, is only a possibility. Actual impact depends on the member states that established them and their respective interests and preferences. Their contribution is limited to improving

the cooperation among states: by improving efficiency of cooperation among states that recognize cooperative interests and by making the perceived interests of the states more cooperative.

The successful models of regional cooperation usually rely on some or all of the following key elements: a clear vision of gains; vision drivers acceptable to members; absence of serious schism; willingness to subsume ego. The following elements are also important: the balance between short- and long-term objectives; mobilization of the domestic stakeholders and citizens; tolerance of minor differences; a compelling theme; establishment of the institutional links and providing help to member-states to build such institutions. Besides this, there are also other elements that are of importance for the successful regional cooperation such as: balance between short- and long-term objectives, creation of institutional links between the participating countries, and assistance by non-state actors.

The theories of international organisation specifically point to some of the most common limiting factors like ambitions of the member states, lack of a long-term perspective that can rival immediate national interests, absence of a resolution of

bilateral disputes and others³.

All abovementioned concepts, typologies, as well as limiting factors and those that lead to success are highly applicable to the case of the regional cooperation in the Western Balkans.

The countries of the Western Balkans share two common goals in their respective foreign policies - good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation and membership in the European Union. Moreover, the former is an essential part of the latter. They are all required to contribute to stability, reconciliation and to work on creating the climate conducive to addressing open bilateral issues as well as legacies of the past. It is also an obligation that stems from the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) and includes all involved parties, regardless of their formal status in the accession process.

A key EU accession objective in the Western Balkans is to engender the regional collaboration and reconstruct social,

political and economic ties between the states in the region that emerged from the breakup of Yugoslavia. The EU consolidated and institutionalised its approach to the region in late 90ies through a policy and legal tool called the Stabilisation and Association Process. The approach combines Europeanisation and conditionality⁴. The threefold transition process that the Central and Eastern Europe had undergone, has also been complemented in the Balkans by a fourth component – the post-conflict reconstruction and long-term stabilisation. The concept of ‘South East Europe’, brought together not only the former Yugoslav states but also their neighboring countries, including some current EU Member States (for example, Croatia). This regional ownership, coupled with the EU partners who have many common institutional, legal and cultural experiences, has been crucial not only in ensuring the relevance, but also the effectiveness and efficiency of regional organisations.

³ Others are: failure to transplant borrowed concepts; enlargement of an organization that slows down its internal integration; top-down process that is directed by leaders; dominant partners or control by the mediated system of regional order.

⁴ Petr Čermak, “The Stabilization and Association Process as a Strategic Framework for the Europeanization of the Western Balkans,” in *Balkanizing Europeanization: Fight against Corruption and Regional Relations in the Western Balkans* (Peter Lang, 2019), 34–60; Claire Gordon, “The Stabilization and Association Process in the Western Balkans: An Effective Instrument of Post-Conflict Management?,” *Ethnopolitics* 8, no. 3–4 (2009): 325–40.

2. Overview of regional organizations and initiatives

Regional cooperation and reconciliation represent pivotal policy objectives of the EU enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans, ever since the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁵ In support of the Dayton, Erdut, Ohrid Framework and other peace agreements, the international community's, and especially Brussels' main goal was to assist the Western Balkans in creating a politically stable and economically prosperous region with sustained democracy, rule of law, and respect for human and minority rights.⁶ As a result of the EU-sponsored peacebuilding and reconciliation process in the Western Balkans, a plethora of regional organisations and initiatives emerged on the regional

scene aimed at transposing the EU values and standards in the war-torn region to prepare the countries for full membership in the EU structures.

In terms of their role, size, scope, and support, the regional organisations and initiatives in the Western Balkans significantly vary – from organisations that are subject to international treaties to networks with formal governing structures or lack thereof, including regional projects, regional civil society organisations, and ad-hoc entities.⁷ More than 30 organisations and initiatives are financially stable with fully operational governing structures.⁸ Most of them have close cooperation with the major regional organisation – the Regional Cooperation Council but also higher entities, such as the Berlin Process, as well as with the major donors like the EU and the Western Balkan governments.⁹

⁵ Jelica Minić, Zoran Nechev, and Ivan Nikolovski, "Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans – Is There a Civil Society Pillar?" (Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" - Skopje, November 2019), 2, https://idsocs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WEBA5_Regional_Cooperation_in_the_western_balkans_is_there_a_civil_society_pilar.pdf.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jelica Minić, "Lessons Learned From the Crisis and the Role of Regional Cooperation in Fighting Economic Repercussions," in *The Covid-19 Pandemic in the Western Balkans: Consequences and Policy Approaches*, ed. Valeska Esch and Viktoria Palm (Aspen Institute Germany, 2020), 109, <https://www.aspeninstitute.de/wp-content/uploads/2020-The-Covid-19-Pandemic-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>; Minić, Nechev, and Nikolovski, "Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans – Is There a Civil Society Pillar?," 11.

⁸ Minić, "Lessons Learned From the Crisis and the Role of Regional Cooperation in Fighting Economic Repercussions," 109.

⁹ Ibid.

The membership in in some of regional organizations and initiatives is not exclusively limited to the Western Balkans. On the contrary, it is more often extended to the wider region of Southeast Europe or other regions and countries, such as the Visegrad Group countries, Turkey, the United Kingdom and even the US. Therefore, some of the regional organisations and initiatives include the EU in its entirety (e.g. Energy Community and Transport Community); others are limited to certain EU member states, for instance, the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative, the Berlin Process, the South East European Cooperation Process and many other (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Poland); while some engage with the Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) and Russia, such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and the Central European Initiative.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is home to the majority of the regional organisations and initiatives in the Western Balkans, partly because the Regional Cooperation Council

is headquartered in the country's capital Sarajevo as well. North Macedonia and Serbia host three regional organizations and initiatives each. The Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative, the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe, and the Standing Working Group Regional Rural Development operate from Skopje, while the secretariats of the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe, the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons and the Transport are based in Belgrade. Albania and its capital Tirana provide the head offices of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office and the Western Balkans Fund, while the Montenegrin town of Danilovgrad hosts the Regional School of Public Administration. No regional organisation or initiative has headquarters in Pristina. Lastly, there are regional organisations and initiatives whose main offices are located outside the borders of the region, such as Central European Free Trade Agreement or the Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum in Brussels and Trieste respectively.

Based on the available sources,¹⁰ the authors' research, and conducted interviews with the representatives of the ministries of foreign affairs in the region, this paper identifies **60** regional organizations and initiatives in which some or all Western Balkans parties take part. The regional organizations and initiatives are presented in **Table 1 (Annex 1)**.

Limitation related to this paper, however, is the inability of the authors to comprehensively detect all the functioning regional organisations and initiatives in the Western Balkans because of lack of data and information. Apart from this, most of the existing literature is already outdated and does not include all the players on the regional scene, partly because some of them are newly emerged with unpredictable development. Additional limiting factor is, due to the open bilateral issues in the region, that the Western Balkan con-

tracting parties have often disputed each other's representation and participation in the regional organisations and initiatives or, at times, had unilaterally withdrawn from some of the binding provisions of the founding agreements in some of the organizations they participate in, such as the recent example of CEFTA. These practices have negatively affected regional cooperation in general and hindered the already agreed achievements for their enhancement.

However, for the sake of simplicity and relevance, this paper only focuses on the regional organisations and initiatives whose work is complementary to the EU accession prospects of the region and where the majority or all Western Balkan contracting parties participate. The leading regional organisations and initiatives are alphabetically explained below:

¹⁰ Minić, "Lessons Learned From the Crisis and the Role of Regional Cooperation in Fighting Economic Repercussions"; Minić, Nechev, and Nikolovski, "Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans – Is There a Civil Society Pillar?"; Jelica Minić, "Democratization and Reconciliation in the Western Balkans: Regional Cooperation as Reconciliation Factor"; Stefana Greavu and Gazmend Turdiu, eds., "Changing with the Region: RCC Strategy and Work Programme 2017-2019," *Regional Cooperation Council, Sarajevo*, no. 3 (May 31, 2016), <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/34/strategy-and-work-programme-2017-2019-changing-with-the-region>; Amer Kapetanovic and Gazmend Turdiu, eds., "Stepping up the Transformation: RCC Strategy and Work Programme 2020 - 2022," *Regional Cooperation Council, Sarajevo*, no. 4 (July 2019), <https://www.rcc.int/admin/files/docs/reports/RCC-Strategy-and-Work-Programme-2020-22-rich.pdf>; European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations - European Commission, "Regional Cooperation," December 6, 2016, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/regional-cooperation-0_en.

Berlin Process

Officially known as the Western Balkans Summit, the Berlin Process is an intergovernmental initiative that includes the Western Balkan six, nine EU member states (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Greece, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Slovenia), and the United Kingdom.

Launched in 2014 by the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the Berlin Process is envisioned as both a complementary and supplementary initiative aimed at assisting the integration of the Western Balkans to the European Union by „**making** additional real progress in the reform process, in resolving outstanding bilateral and internal issues, and in achieving reconciliation within and between the societies in the region“, and “enhancing regional economic cooperation and lay the foundations for sustainable growth”.¹¹ As such, the Berlin Process encompasses few policy areas, including resolution of bilateral issues, economic cooperation, trade and

infrastructure, youth, business, and civil society.¹²

The first Western Balkans Summit took place in Berlin in 2014 under the German Presidency with the Berlin Process, followed by Vienna 2015, Paris 2016, Trieste 2017, London 2018, Poznan 2019, Sofia 2020, and again Berlin 2021. As a result, the countries presiding with the Berlin Process had an opportunity to modify the summits' agendas to meet their priorities vis-a-vis the Western Balkans.¹³

Originally with a mandate of four years, the Western Balkan Summits continued being held even after 2018, establishing various entities of intergovernmental cooperation in the Western Balkans, such as the Regional Youth Cooperation Office and the Western Balkans Fund. In addition to the Western Balkan Summit, the Berlin Process provided other platforms for cooperation among the different stakehold-

¹¹ Government of the Federal Republic of Germany, “Final Declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans,” 2014, <https://archiv.bundesregierung.de/archiv-de/meta/startseite/final-declaration-by-the-chair-of-the-conference-on-the-western-balkans-754634>.

¹² Ivan Nikolovski, “Three Visions, One Goal? Credible Enlargement Perspective, Berlin Process and France’s Strategy for the Western Balkans in Comparison” (Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” - Skopje, July 2019), 2, <https://idscs.org.mk/en/portfolio/three-visions-one-goal-credible-enlargement-perspective-berlin-process-and-frances-strategy-for-the-western-balkans-in-comparison/>.

¹³ Ibid

ers from the region, such as the Business Forum, Civil Society Forum and/or Think Tank Forum, and Youth Forum.¹⁴ As of July 2021, the future of the Berlin Process is unknown.

Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)

CEFTA¹⁵ was originally signed in 1992 by Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland to prepare these countries to better integrate into the structures of the EU, primarily the common market. Gradually, it expanded to the wider region of Southeast Europe, including Bulgaria, Croatia, Moldova, Romania, Slovenia, and the Western Balkans. As the founding and older members withdrew from the agreement following the EU eastern enlargement cycles of 2004, 2007, and 2013, the remaining parties to the agreement as of 2013 are the Western Balkans, plus Moldova.

The new CEFTA agreement was signed in 2006 and it envisions an all-inclusive regional free trade regime among the signatories, complementary to their EU membership prospects and World Trade

Organization's commitments. As per the agreement, the parties have an opportunity to jointly and consensually negotiate policies that would enhance regional cooperation in the areas of trade and investment. CEFTA has an annual rotating Chairmanship, while the Secretariat is based in Brussels.

Energy Community

Composed of the EU Member States represented by the European Commission, the Western Balkans, and the countries of Eastern Partnership (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine), the Energy Community¹⁶ represents an international organisation aimed at establishing an integrated energy market across the European continent. Established in 2005, the organisation's main goal is to enforce the EU common energy policy to the participating countries from the Western Balkans and the Black Sea Region. In achieving it, the Energy Community is devoted to the creation of a Pan-European competitive and stable energy market, based on efficient and renewable energy, fully integrated within the EU structures, able to deliver on

¹⁴ The Berlin Process Information and Resource Centre, accessed August 10, 2021, <https://berlinprocess.info/about/>.

¹⁵ Central European Free Trade Agreement, accessed August 10, 2021, <https://cefta.int>.

¹⁶ "Energy Community," accessed August 11, 2021, <https://www.energy-community.org/>.

economic development and social stability in the regions of interest. The Community is almost exclusively founded by the EU, has a rotating chairmanship-in-office, and headquarters in Vienna.

The Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE)¹⁷ is a regional initiative founded in 2004. ERI SEE operates in the field of educational and training-related cooperation among the Western Balkans, Croatia, and Moldova. ERI SEE's work is closely linked to the EU's Education and Training 2020 programme, and comprises diverse activities, such as peer learning, conferences, seminars, workshops, and common projects. Guided by the ideals of sustainable education reforms based on the EU educational standards, ERI SEE's priorities are threefold, including 1) modernization of vocational education and training in close cooperation with the business sector; 2) mutual recognition of higher education diplomas; and 3) quality education in the primary and secondary schools in the region. ERI SEE's structure envisions a Governing Board composed of the representatives of the

ministries of education from the signatory parties, Austria, and the Regional Cooperation Council. Other important bodies are the Consultative Body and the Secretariat headquartered in Belgrade.

Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI)

Being another well-established regional player, MARRI¹⁸, established in 2004, represents an intergovernmental regional organization comprising the Western Balkans six parties, tasked with the promotion of closer regional cooperation in the areas of migration (legal, illegal, and labour), as well as asylum, border control, human trafficking, visa regime, readmission, and return of refugees in line with international and EU standards. MARRI's key objective is to establish a free and well-managed regime of movement of persons in the region, thereby ensuring Western Balkans' development and stability. MARRI's main bodies include the Forum of Ministers, the Committee, and the Regional Centre with a seat in North Macedonia's capital Skopje, which acts as the organization's Executive Secretariat. Under MARRI's auspices, four

¹⁷ ERI SEE Secretariat, "About ERI SEE," accessed August 11, 2021, <https://www.erisee.org/about-eri-see/>.

¹⁸ MARRI – Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative, accessed August 11, 2021, <https://marri-rc.org.mk/about-us/>.

sector networks operate in achieving the organizations' goals: 1) Border management police network; 2) Cooperation on readmission network; 3) Coordinators for prevention of trafficking in human beings network; and Heads of Asylum Departments network.

Network of Associations of Local Authorities in South-East Europe (NALAS)

Founded in 2001, NALAS¹⁹ is a unique regional network connecting 14 associations of local governments on behalf of around 9000 local authorities from the Western Balkans, Bulgaria, Croatia, Moldova, Romania and Turkey. NALAS' aims at strengthening the process of democratisation and decentralisation in Southeast Europe by helping the local governments to be active and crucial stakeholders in the process of reconciliation and stabilisation in the region, henceforth contributing to the process of European integration. Skopje likewise hosts the NALAS Secretariat, which is responsible for the overall coordination and the implementation of the organization's activities.

Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative (RAI)

RAI²⁰ is a regional initiative among the Western Balkan parties, Moldova, and three EU member states being Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania. Established in 2000, RAI assists regional cooperation in fighting corruption in SEE by promoting the European good governance values and standards, including reliable public administration; resilient legislation; rule of law, transparency, and integrity in business operations; as well as active civil society and raised public awareness. RAI has a Secretariat in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)

RCC²¹ was officially launched in 2008 by a consensual decision of the ministers of foreign affairs of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), thereby succeeding the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. Today, RCC represents the largest and most recognizable regionally owned and led all-inclusive umbrella organisation tasked with the coordination of

¹⁹ Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe, accessed August 11, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121103184200/http://www.nalas.eu/Default.aspx>.

²⁰ Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative, "Mandate and Objectives," accessed August 11, 2021, <https://rai-see.org/who-we-are/secretariat/mandate-and-objectives/>.

²¹ Regional Cooperation Council, "About Us," accessed August 11, 2021, <https://www.rcc.int/pages/2/about-us>.

regional cooperation in Southeast Europe, focused on its enhancement in line with the region's European and Euro-Atlantic agenda.

RCC brings together 46 participants, including all Western Balkan parties; 19 individual EU Member States,²² third countries like Canada, Moldova, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, US, as well as international organizations, involving the Council of Europe as a whole and some of its affiliated institutions (Council of Europe Development Bank); EU as a whole²³ and its affiliated institutions (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and European Investment Bank), NATO, OECD, OSCE, the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative, UN and its affiliated institutions (International Organization for Migration, United Nations

Development Programme, and United Nations Economic Commission for Europe), as well as the World Bank.

In terms of regional cooperation, RCC covers multiple policy areas, including economic and social development, energy and infrastructure, justice and home affairs, security cooperation and human capital but also cross-cutting topics, such as parliamentary cooperation, media development, civil society activities and gender.

RCC's work is steered by its Board²⁴ and it is mainly financed by the EU. The executive operations of the organization are carried out by Secretariat based in Sarajevo. RCC has a liaison office in Brussels as well.

²² Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden.

²³ Represented through representatives of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission

²⁴ Members of the RCC Board are Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Croatia, the EU, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Kosovo*, Latvia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, and the United States of America.

Regional School for Public Administration (ReSPA)

Created in 2010 as a joint initiative financed by the European Commission and the Western Balkan parties, ReSPA²⁵ focuses on the regional cooperation in the field of public administration by endorsing the establishment of a regionally integrated, transparent, accountable, and professional public administration regimes across the Western Balkans, with a special emphasis on quality management, e-Governance, centre-of-government, human resource management and development, and better regulation in line with the corresponding EU acquis, as well as the best practices of the EU member states. ReSPA's work is financed by the EU and steered by five Western Balkan partners, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia,

while Kosovo* is a beneficiary party. ReSPA has a secretariat based in Danilovgrad, Montenegro, and closely cooperates with the governments, academia, experts, and public administrations from the region.

Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)

RYCO²⁶ is one of the youngest yet most recognizable regional organizations established under the auspices of the Berlin Process. It is an independently functioning institutional mechanism, co-founded by the Western Balkans parties during the 2016 Western Balkans Summit in Paris, aimed at promoting reconciliation and cooperation between the youth in the region through youth exchange programs. The Albanian capital Tirana is home to RYCO's secretariat.

²⁵ *This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence. ReSPA, "What We Do," accessed August 12, 2021, <https://www.respaweb.eu/10/pages/42/what-we-do>; ReSPA, "Who We Are," accessed August 12, 2021, <https://www.respaweb.eu/9/pages/5/who-we-are>.

²⁶ RYCO, "About Ryco," Regional Youth Cooperation Office, accessed August 12, 2021, https://www.rycowb.org/?page_id=152.

Transport Community

The Transport Community²⁷ replaced the South East Europe Transport Observatory (SEETO) founded in 2004 when in 2019, the Council of the European Union approved the Treaty establishing the Transport Community from 2017. The Transport Community treaty was signed between the EU and the Western Balkans six, resulting in the establishment of an international organisation working in the field of road, rail, inland waterway, and maritime transport and mobility, aimed at integrating the Western Balkans' transport markets into the EU single transport market. In achieving this objective, the Transport Community is helping the Western Balkan partners to transpose and implement the EU transport acquis and endorses both the intraregional connectivity, as well as the connectivity between the Western Balkans and the EU. The secretariat of the Transport Community is headquartered in Belgrade.

Western Balkans Fund (WBF)

Established under the auspices of the Berlin Process, following the political, technical and financial support of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), WBF²⁸ became operational in 2017. Building upon the experience of IVF, WBF functions as an international organization and foundation, formed by the governments of the Western Balkan parties. WBF promotes regional cooperation by supporting small and medium projects in three key areas: sustainable economic development, education exchange and cooperation, and cultural cooperation. In addition, WBF treats youth, cross-border cooperation, European integration, and gender, as overarching issues, covering all of its fields of cooperation. The Secretariat of the WBF is located in Tirana.

²⁷ Transport Community, "About Us," accessed August 12, 2021, <https://www.transport-community.org/about/>.

²⁸ Western Balkans Fund, "About Us," January 30, 2016, <http://westernbalkansfund.org/about-us/>.

3. Individual experiences of Western Balkans and their perceptions

The following part is focused on the foreign policy positions of the Western Balkan contracting parties in the context of regional cooperation and regional integration, as well as an analysis of their past experiences and current challenges. Special attention will be paid to the ways in which the countries of the region understand their positions and how they use their membership in the organisations and initiatives in achieving their regional and general foreign policy objectives, but also the ways and activities that have contributed to the development and implementation of these organisations and initiatives including the one of “Open Balkans”.

ALBANIA

In comparison to the former Yugoslavia, Albania ventured into the post-communist world of the early 1990's in total diplo-

matic isolation from the rest of the world, including other Balkan countries. Although Albania was seemingly eager to engage in political dialogue, the virulent situation in the region was not conducive of cooperation. At the time, Albania's foreign policy initiatives focused more on fostering relations with the United States and other Euro-Atlantic institutions as opposed to strengthening ties within the region.

Throughout the past three decades, Albania's economic ties with Italy, Greece and other countries of the European Union have grown stronger, while those with the Western Balkans have not seen any significant changes. Upon the regional endorsement of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) in 2006, there was a noticeable increase in Albania's trade with the Western Balkan countries, especially with Serbia. This development did not occur in a linear manner, mainly due to considerable inconsistencies from one year to the next.²⁹ Once CEFTA was ratified in 2007, it substituted almost all of Albania's bilateral trade agreements with countries of the region, namely with Northern Macedonia at the time in 2002, with Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2004, with

²⁹ Effects of stabilization and association agreements and CEFTA2006 on WB6 European Integration and regional cooperation: achievements and ways forward, Belgrade 2018

Moldova in 2004, with Serbia and Montenegro at that time in 2004, with Kosovo*/UNMIK in 2003 and Croatia in 2003.³⁰

Especially in the first years, CEFTA had a considerable impact in Albania's trade with the Western Balkans, particularly with Serbia. Trade between the two countries had been mostly stagnant during the 1990s. As a result of CEFTA, Serbia became Albania's main trade partner and one of the top 10 main trade partners in general.³¹ In the first two years, there was a four-fold increase in trade between Albania and other CEFTA countries. During this time, Albania's exports doubled, and imports tripled.³²

A similar pattern of growth continued in the following years, but never comparable with the initial progress following the immediate implementation of the agreement. However, apart from the evident improvements in trade relations, there were also shortcomings and fluctuations within the CEFTA framework. Theoretically, countries

have removed all tariff barriers between them, but many non-tariff barriers remain in place.³³

Moreover, another important regional project is the Berlin Process. In the early phases of this project, Albanian expectations were very high, as the initiative was mostly concentrated on the infrastructure, such as railways, ports, and the energy grid. However, these are projects that demand considerable budgets for which Albania doesn't have the capability to finance them independently. As a result, Albania welcomed any financial contributions from the European Union to fully implement these projects. As of December 2020, Albania had received funding for six different infrastructural projects, but none of them reached completion before November 2021. Only one of them, the railway line between the capital of Tirana and the port city of Durrës, with a connecting line to Tirana International Airport had reached the completion phase in November.

³⁰ "Bilateral and Regional Trade Agreements Notified to the WTO", WorldTradeLaw.net, <http://www.worldtradelaw.net/databases/ftas.php>

³¹ Effects of stabilization and association agreements and CEFTA2006 on WB6 European Integration and regional cooperation: achievements and ways forward, Belgrade 2018

³² Ibid.

³³ Monitor.al, "Biznes vëllazëror", 8 barrierat tregtare mes Kosovës dhe Shqipërisë, 05/03/2020 <https://www.monitor.al/biznes-vellazeror-8-barrierat-tregtare-mes-kosoves-dhe-shqiperise/>

Apart from CEFTA and the Berlin Process, the Western Balkan Fund has been another important regional cooperation instrument. Funded by the six states of the Western Balkans (Albania, Kosovo*, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, North Macedonia and Montenegro), one of the WBF main objectives is to “promote the development of closer cooperation between the contracting Parties”.³⁴ For Albania, this was an important development not only in promoting regional cooperation, but also in increasing the country’s presence in regional politics. The headquarters of the WBF were based in Tirana and the Albanian career diplomat Dr. Gjergji Murra was elected the Director of the WBF. As is evident, Albanian involvement with the development of this cooperation initiative was highly instrumental and increased Albania’s political prominence and engagement on a regional scale.

In the several rounds of call of applications since 2017, civil society and non-profit organizations from Albania have received, just like other organizations in the region, grants in fields such as cultural cooperation, educational and scientific exchange

es, as well as sustainable development, enhancing collaboration with peers from other Western Balkans countries.

Another important regional cooperation initiative is the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). This initiative was particularly important for Albania because it served as a tool of visibility for the country. Majlinda Bregu, Albania’s Former Minister of Integration, took office as the Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council on January 1st 2019, following her appointment by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) at the meeting held on 23 April in Brdo pri Kranju, Slovenia.³⁵ Under Majlinda Bregu, RCC has been transformed into an essential regional instrument, especially concerning the Common Regional Market action plan 2021-2024, that was signed at the Berlin Process Summit held on 10 November, 2020 in Sofia, Bulgaria. Bregu has been a strong supporter of regional cooperation initiatives and has considerably aided the implementation of the action plan as a means of uniting the region as well as a steppingstone for regional European Union

³⁴ Agreement concerning the establishment of the Western Balkans Fund, <http://westernbalkansfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Agreement.pdf>

³⁵ <https://www.rcc.int/pages/53/secretary-general>

integration. The above-mentioned regional initiatives have considerably increased Albania's cooperation with the other Western Balkan (WB) countries. At the same time, they have also considerably increased Albania's presence in the region. Tirana serves as the headquarters of the WBF and the RCC is headed by an Albanian former Minister.

Regarding other regional initiatives, including RYCO and the Western Balkan Fund, they have served to raise the Albanians' awareness of the surrounding region. For example, they have fostered dialogue between ethnic Albanians and Serbians, with whom relations were relatively inexistent just a few years ago. More than the economic or political developments that these initiatives have bolstered, the societal and cultural effects have been the most crucial. Interactions between peoples of different Balkan countries with long-standing hostile relationships have increased significantly, and they now tend to have fewer prejudices regarding one another and are open to dialogue and cooperation. Among all the regional initiatives mentioned throughout, CEFTA has undoubtedly been the most impactful for the region. In strong opposition to the year 2007, when Albania's trade with the

region was minimal, the situation is now drastically different, especially considering the heightened trade relations with Serbia, North Macedonia and Kosovo*.

Despite the significant achievements of the last several years, there is still room for improvement and many challenges remain. All these initiatives, while they have increased regional cooperation in the Balkans significantly compared to a decade prior, still mark the beginning of a long and arduous journey into fostering healthy ties among Balkan countries, a region historically afflicted by conflict and war. There are several measures that can increase the strength and effectiveness of these efforts. For example, the fund allocation from each of the WB countries for the WBF could be increased from the current 30,000 Euros at which it stands. This would signify more opportunities for regional organizations to implement projects on a much bigger scale.

As far as the key stakeholders are concerned, the departments of regional cooperation in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, remain in many cases, understaffed and lack adequate training to keep up with the developments in the region. In a study published by FES in 2013, the authors

found in the case of Albania that integration in the EU and NATO, and cooperation with the EU and the United States are the driving forces moving regional cooperation forward. In particular, the study found that national-level capacities are lacking human and administrative resources and that there is greater need for coordination among different institutions on a national level. The study proposed setting clear priorities in support of regional cooperation initiatives because “there is a noticeable discrepancy between the number of regional initiatives ... and budget allocations for implementation”. More specifically, they make a case for increasing the capacities of the Regional Initiatives Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Albania.³⁶ Although many years have passed since this study was published, their findings are still quite relevant.

Another important issue is the infrastructural ties between Albania and the region. While the Berlin Process focuses mostly on connectivity and infrastructure, the projects are still a long way from completion. Albania lacks crucial rail connections with the region; while the highway

infrastructure is good with Kosovo*, it is severely lacking with Northern Macedonia and Montenegro, standing in the way of trade and other economic activities. In terms of air travel, while the direct flights between Tirana and Belgrade have considerably strengthened the ties between Albania and Serbia, there are no other direct flight routes with countries of the Western Balkans or even with the Balkans in general, excluding Greece. This lack of infrastructural development could lead to obstacles in multi-level cooperation in the near future.

Despite the impact of CEFTA and other regional initiatives, trade with the Balkan region is still lower than Albania’s trade with other EU and non-EU countries. For the first 10 months of 2021, 72% of Albania’s exports were directed to the EU. None of the WB countries featured as part of the top 5 trade partners. At the same time, investments from the region in Albania as well as Albania’s investments in other countries of the region remain sporadic and rare. Although it is evident that throughout the past decade, regional cooperation has made extraordinary

³⁶ Stefan Dehnert/Dane Taleski (Eds), Monitoring Regional Cooperation in South East Europe, FES 2013, pg 9. (Albania part authors: Alba Cela, Enfrid Islami) <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/td-moe/10067.pdf>

strides since the 1990s and early 2000s, the potential for further cooperation and development remains enormous, especially in the economic and infrastructure realm.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Bosnia and Herzegovina is interested in regional cooperation by default. As the implementation of the General Framework Agreement for Peace in BiH (Dayton Peace Accords - DPA) implied an active participation of neighboring countries, with the full focus of the wider international community, B&H immediately after the war established full relations with countries in the region and started building its regional position in a very constructive manner. The then central position of B&H in the region, both in geographical and political terms, was confirmed by the organization of the Stability Pact Summit in Sarajevo in 1999, which was the largest international gathering in this part of the world. The

event was multifaceted, both for the EU and the region, and the key messages of the summit shaped *raison d'être* of all future regional organizations and initiatives – strengthening peace, democracy, human rights, economic progress and stability throughout the region, with the aim of preventing crises and achieving EU and NATO membership for the countries of the region. Since then, the issue of EU integration and integration in the region has remained permanently linked for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The memberships BiH achieved after 2000 are mostly region-oriented which is indicative of three main changes - peacetime diplomacy, general shift in the political climate of the neighbourhood³⁷, and the SAA³⁸. General Foreign Policy Directions and Priorities from 2003 list regional strategic objectives and the priority actions in regional organizations such as - CEI, SEECP, SECI, AAI, DCP, the then Stability Pact, as well as regional issues of special

³⁷ The death of the Croatian president Franjo Tuđman and the overthrow and extradition to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) of Serbian president Slobodan Milošević.

³⁸ Džananović, "BiH's Engagement in Multilateral Fora: Key Foreign Policy Positions within International Organizations," in *Bosnia and Herzegovina's Foreign Policy Since Independence*, New Perspectives on South East Europe (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 47.

importance - regional arms control³⁹. Recent Foreign Policy Strategy 2018-2023, BiH confirms its commitment to regional cooperation. The 2018-2023 Strategy specifies a number of issues that have significant regional dimension, such as the security, migration flows, countering terrorism and violent extremism, organized crime and illegal arms trade, cyber threats, but also those that have an important development potential such as energy and transport. It also names the Berlin Process, Brdo-Brijuni Process, SEECP, RCC, CEI, MII, MAARI, RYCO and WBF as priorities.⁴⁰

While the priorities in terms of regional cooperation have not changed much over the years, the role of B&H in this context has declined significantly, and relations in the region and the context of regional cooperation have changed markedly. Both

aspects, in the case of B&H, are closely related because the domestic policy context of B&H is very sensitive to political changes in the region. In the initial phase of regional cooperation, B&H has been taking initiatives with great confidence and has been strongly engaged in the process of re-establishing relations, but also very intensive bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Foreign-policy related domestic political consensus⁴¹, reflects a complex, but at the same time very steady and balanced agreement, primarily between local actors. This offered the region extremely precise and equally balanced positions and initiatives that, at the outset, were acceptable to other countries. During that period, B&H was very active in the Stability Pact, CEI, SEECP, SECI, and it led certain initiatives that concerned specific initiatives that were very important for BiH – Stability Pact Anti-Corruption Initiatives⁴²,

³⁹ Predsjedništvo Bosne i Hercegovine, "Opći Pravci i Prioriteti Za Provođenje Vanjske Politike BiH," March 26, 2003, http://www.mvp.gov.ba/vanjska_politika_bih/osnovni_pravci_vanjske_politike_bih/?id=2.

⁴⁰ Ibid;

⁴¹ According to the BiH Constitution, foreign policy is led by a three-partite Presidency consisting of a Bosniak and a Croat from the Federation of BiH and a Serb from the Republika Srpska. Key decisions are made by consensus.

⁴² The seat was assigned to Sarajevo, and a BiH diplomat Josip Brkić was appointed the first Executive Secretary in 2003.

Sarajevo Declarations⁴³, and in the context of RACVIAC⁴⁴. The end of a very successful era was marked by the greatest regional success - the transformation of the Stability Pact at the initiative of SEECP Foreign Ministers in the RCC, and the support of the region and the wider international community for establishing the RCC headquarters in Sarajevo.

The second phase of regional integration, which B&H reasonably expected to reflect the region's maturity, optimize the established level of cooperation and bring the region significantly closer to membership, was largely marked by the Serbia-Kosovo* open dispute. Along with Serbia, B&H is the only country in the region that, due to the lack of consensus, i.e. resolute opposition of the Republika Srpska entity, has not recognized Kosovo's* independence. In this regard, B&H itself has become part

of the problem⁴⁵. Also, there has been no visible progress in resolving open bilateral issues with Serbia and Croatia, which are still very present in the political life of B&H, both as a signatory to the Dayton Peace Agreement⁴⁶ and due to the fact that "almost half of the Bosnian population and two out of three constituent peoples (Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats) consider the two neighbouring countries as their kin states and/or have high levels of loyalties that more than often supersede their loyalty to BiH"⁴⁷. The real progress in the development of good neighbourly relations has been made with Montenegro and this can be regarded as an illustration of the good neighbourly relations that the EU wishes to see in the region.⁴⁸

While the enthusiasm for cooperation has not faded, some open bilateral issues have escalated and have been extensively

⁴³ The Sarajevo Declaration was the first refugee-related initiative adopted by the governments of the region signed in 2005 and aimed at resolving the outstanding humanitarian challenges by allowing voluntary returns or local integration.

⁴⁴ BiH diplomats headed the Regional Arms Control and Verification Center twice. Those were Ambassadors Nedžad Hadžimusić and Branimir Mandić.

⁴⁵ It is an absurd fact that the citizens of Kosovo* can travel to Serbia without any special problems, but not to BiH.

⁴⁶ Officials of both countries have been warned several times by the High Representative for BiH that their countries are not "guarantors of the agreement", but its parties, i.e. signatories.

⁴⁷ Petar Marković and Mate Subašić, "BiH's Foreign Policy Toward Neighboring Countries: Patterns of Reinterpretation and Redefinition," in *Bosnia and Herzegovina's Foreign Policy since Independence* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 185.

⁴⁸ Jasmin Hasić, Nedžma Džananović, and Lejla Ramić Mesihović, "Implicit' Contestations of EU Foreign Policy Norm-Domestication in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia," *Global Affairs* 6, no. 4–5 (October 19, 2020): 422, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2021.1897952>.

exploited in producing tensions, especially in cyclical pre-election periods. BiH has continued its constructive, but a more passive engagement, while more visible contributions were realised only through successful periodic presidencies. A large number of organizations and initiatives at different levels, and their connection to specific issues have brought the Presidency of B&H and the MFA of B&H to the point where they are gradually losing insight into all aspects of regional cooperation, even though they support it in principle. A kind of passivity at the regional level is reflected in a smaller number of initiatives from B&H towards the region, as well as a smaller number of regional officials from B&H. The reasons are primarily of a domestic policy nature - the Presidency is finding it increasingly difficult to reach a consensus on foreign policy issues, even when it comes to the region. Not only is

there no internal consensus on providing support to promising B&H candidates for regional positions, but there are no usual appointments of national coordinators in the MFA of B&H for certain regional initiatives⁴⁹. The absence of a strategy and action plan within certain organizations very often results in inappropriate monitoring of the activities of organizations and initiatives, and the marginalization of B&H.

The European Commission assesses the role of B&H as constructive⁵⁰. Special importance is attached to the country's participation in the Berlin Process and the related initiatives - the Connectivity Agenda, the REA Roadmap, and, subsequently, in the Transport Community.⁵¹ For its part, B&H is becoming very aware of the change in the functioning of regional cooperation, the disparity between the increased volume of obligations and

⁴⁹ The 2014-2018 Presidency made no appointments of national coordinators for individual regional organizations and initiatives, which are the competence of the BiH MFA. Appointments have not been made in the current composition (2018-2022) either. Although the BiH MFA proposed the appointment of ambassadors at large, five of whom are in the BiH MFA, the Presidency failed to adopt the initiative.

⁵⁰ European Commission Staff, "Analytical Report Bosnia and Herzegovina 2019" (Brussels: European Commission, May 29, 2019), 83, <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-bosnia-and-herzegovina-analytical-report.pdf>.

⁵¹ BiH did not join the Transport Community at the Western Balkans Leaders Summit held in Trieste in July 2017, due to the inconsistency of positions in BiH, more precisely, the opposition of the Republika Srpska. After the decisive reactions of the EU and the then Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn and the warning that, as a result of non-accession, BiH could lose EUR 46 million which were allocated by the EU for four major infrastructure projects, BiH joined the Transport Community in September 2017.

modest capacities of state institutions, as well as the severity of unresolved bilateral issues and lack of political trust, the dominant approach of certain countries of the region, and the importance and effects that bilateral ties and coordination between individual members can have in the wider regional context. It is believed that the initiatives signed by the EU have a greater chance of being accepted, which indicates a lack of trust, but also insufficiency of mutual coordination between the countries. B&H is one of the countries in the region that would readily support the streamlining and rationalization of regional organizations and initiatives, talks on functional reforms within them, and a general agreement on the principles for the election of regional officials.

In the third, current phase of regional cooperation development, B&H, is facing a *"lost raison d'être"* of the process, and very important political and practical matters related to the future of regional cooperation. The issue was further substantiated by the "Open Balkans" tripartite initiative, which B&H failed to join at this time. The political views are divided. Bosnian and Croat side finds unacceptable this and any

other initiative that is unrelated to the perspective of EU membership, as well as the additional institutionalisation of relations in the region. It is believed that B&H would be particularly vulnerable and that its special interests could not be sufficiently protected compared to the interests of its neighbours, as well as that further integration would lead to the renewal of the modified "Yugosphere". This is where additional arguments are explicitly stressed - that the economic interest is not a 'panacea', that the economy was unable to save the former Yugoslavia, and that even today it is not enough to overcome deep political problems. The OBI, in particular, is criticized for its lack of inclusiveness and transparency, the repetition of content already integrated in the context of CRM plans, and the impression that Serbia is politically exploiting EU disillusionment in Northern Macedonia and Albania. On the other hand, the attitudes from Republika Srpska are positive, considering that the initiative comes from Belgrade, but they are neither particularly loud, nor did they elaborate their "pro" argument in details.

As many times before, it seems that B&H will stay aside due to inconsistent

positions in the country, until there is explicit pressure from the EU or some other international partner aimed at including all countries of the region. In this case as well B&H shows heavy dependence on previous reception among regional agents and inclination to mainly associate with regional initiatives proposed by others, provided that they are not perceived as threats to internal political balance, rather than promoting or spearheading its own initiatives⁵². The attitude towards regional cooperation matters largely depends on the agreement/disagreement of political actors within B&H. Only views that have the full support of all regional actors are acceptable for B&H.

KOSOVO*

Kosovo's* participation and membership in regional initiatives has been immensely more complex than of its neighbouring countries. The level of complexity derived from its contested statehood, namely lack of recognition by Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moreover, the lack of

diplomatic recognition among the EU five EU member states created another layer of obstacles for Kosovo's* future in the EU – the main catalyser of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. The trajectory of Kosovo's* representation in regional initiatives can be divided into two main parts. The pre-independence period (2000 – 2008) in which Kosovo* was not only governed internally by the United Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo* (UNMIK), but also has been represented by UNMIK on regional and international level; the post-independence (2008 – to date) period which was followed by the difficult process of transferring competences internally and externally seeking to gain representation in a completely new reality.

During the UNMIK era in Kosovo*, internal politics and external relations of Kosovo* have been internationally administered. Thus, during one of the most critical periods of time when the region was being formally offered EU perspective in the auspices of the Thessaloniki Summit (2003) – followed by the EU led initiatives to

⁵² Jasmin Hasić and Dijana Dedić, "Chasing the Candidacy Status: Tacit Contestations of EU Norms in Bosnia and Herzegovina," in *Balkanizing Europeanization: Fight Against Corruption and Regional Relations in the Western Balkans* (Peter Lang, 2019), 95.

foster regional cooperation, Kosovo* was not able to administer and strategically decide about its own fate. The lack of local ownership during this period has had an immense impact later during the post-independence period in which Kosovo* was given the competences to create its own foreign policy.

Notably, during the UNMIK period, Kosovo* became part of initiatives of strategic importance. This was the case with the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe – in which UNMIK joined on behalf of Kosovo* in 2007 among other Western Balkan countries.⁵³ In spite of the fact that the Stability Pact has been superseded by the Regional Co-operation Council in 2008⁵⁴, and Kosovo* being part of the Stability Pact, Kosovo* was accepted by RCC later in 2013 due to complexities related to its statehood.⁵⁵ Another milestone agreement for the future of regional cooperation of Western Balkans is the Central European

Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) which was signed in 2006 just before the creation of a new reality in the region. CEFTA replaced all existing bilateral agreement among countries and offered a new regional platform which would also prepare the region for integration in the EU.⁵⁶ Kosovo* in CEFTA was repressed and UNMIK/ Kosovo*, the first perception was that the regional multi-lateral platform would help Kosovo* navigate around the region dodging the political barriers related to its political status, but this did not to prove to be the case.⁵⁷

Declaration of independence of Kosovo* in 2008 brought new barriers which CEFTA as regional platform was unable to overcome. Despite Kosovo's* constant efforts to be represented on equal footing with other countries in the region, representation through UNMIK remained one of the most acceptable and

⁵³ "The Balkan Stability Pact: A Crucial Test for Europe | Wilson Center," accessed November 21, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-balkan-stability-pact-crucial-test-for-europe>.

⁵⁴ "Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe," accessed November 21, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/glossary/stability-pact-south-eastern-europe_en.

⁵⁵ Regional Cooperation Council, "Regional Cooperation Council Regional Cooperation Council's Board Amends Organization's Statute to Allow Participation of Kosovo*," accessed November 21, 2021, <https://www.rcc.int/articles/164/regional-cooperation-councils-board-amends-organizations-statute-to-allow-participation-of-kosovo>.

⁵⁶ "CEFTA - State Portal of the Republic of Kosovo*," accessed November 21, 2021, <https://www.rks-gov.net/EN/f133/foreign-economy/cefta>.

⁵⁷ Borko Handjiski and Lazar Šešćević, *Barriers to Trade in Services in the CEFTA Region*, World Bank Study (Washington, D.C: World Bank, 2011).

desirable option for the non-recognizers. Consequently, UNMIK remains to date relevant still being an important stakeholder and representing Kosovo* in regional initiatives – CEFTA being one of the most important in this case. Nevertheless, even with Kosovo* under UNMIK, problems predominated. From the beginning of the implementation of CEFTA, Kosovo* was facing multi-frontal challenges.⁵⁸ Being represented by UNMIK did not eliminate other barriers related to the documents issued by Kosovo*. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to date do not recognize the institutions of Kosovo*. Thus, the documents issued by Kosovo* did not allow the latter to export to Serbia and BiH. This created obstacles in the free trade barriers spirit of CEFTA. The political complexities between Kosovo* and Serbia statehood issue generated crisis which CEFTA did not have the power to address.⁵⁹ The deconstructive approach of Serbia toward Kosovo* triggered reactions in Kosovo*. One of the most blatant decision with detrimental impact

on CEFTA was the imposed 100% tariffs of Kosovo* toward products of Serbia and B&H.⁶⁰ The EU demanded Kosovo* to abolish the tariffs, but the government declined. Due to the fact that the EU does not officially participate in the Agreement, it lacked mechanisms to force the country to adopt the measures; it can only recommend or ask.⁶¹

Declaration of independence created yet another level of complexity since Kosovo* in addition to being represented by UNMIK in various initiatives, gradually started to participate without the UN chaperon. The process of transferring competences from UNMIK to newly established Kosovo* institutions created a new reality which had to be addressed politically. The new reality created after the declaration of independence had an impact not only on the region but also within the EU – due to non-recognition of the five EU member states (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Spain, and Slovakia). Thus, despite Kosovo's* constant efforts to be represented on

⁵⁸ GAP Institute "Kosovo in CEFTA: In or Out?" "72590_CEFTEEng.Pdf," accessed November 21, 2021, https://www.institutigap.org/documents/72590_CEFTEEng.pdf.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ "Kosovo Hits Serbia with 100% Trade Tariffs amid Interpol Row," *BBC News*, November 21, 2018, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46287975>.

⁶¹ "09_KKI-Policy-Brief_CEFTE_Siljak_20190206.Pdf," accessed November 21, 2021, https://kki.hu/assets/upload/09_KKI-Policy-Brief_CEFTE_Siljak_20190206.pdf.

equal footing with other countries in the region, representation through UNMIK remained one of the most acceptable and desirable option for the non-recognizers. Consequently, UNMIK remains to date relevant still being an important stakeholder and representing Kosovo* in regional initiatives – CEFTA being one of the most important in this case.⁶²

Membership in regional cooperation mechanisms for Kosovo* was important for two main reasons: 1) it provides a solid opportunity for Kosovo* to navigate around non-recognizers by benefiting from multi-lateral platforms; 2) Kosovo* benefits from project and connect effectively with other countries in the region which would be productive for the economy, security, rule of law and other important pressing issues to be addressed in the framework of the EU related reforms. More importantly, participation in regional initiatives would bring Kosovo* closer to the EU and EU or member state led projects of crucial importance in the region.⁶³

Kosovo*'s efforts to become part of the regional plethora were manifested in the framework of the EU facilitated dialogue between Prishtina and Belgrade. Among to find a suitable and acceptable solution for Kosovo* and Serbia – followed by other non-recognizers, the agreement on regional representation has been signed in the auspices of the Brussels Dialogue.

The first step was the Customs issue between Kosovo* and Serbia which was regulated through the Agreement on Custom Stamps reached in 2011 in the auspices of the EU facilitated Dialogue between Prishtina and Belgrade. The agreement on customs stamps (2011) is implemented and it foresaw: free movement of goods in accordance with CEFTA, Serbia accepts 'Kosovo* Customs' stamp, and all accompanying documents have to use 'Kosovo Customs' stamp.⁶⁴

Another agreement on regional representation or the so-called footnote agreement has been signed in 2012. According to the

⁶² Florin Peci, Mario Holzner, and Enver Kutllovci, "Determinants of Kosovo* Trade: A Gravity Model Approach," *South East European Journal of Economics and Business* 5, no. 2 (January 1, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10033-010-0013-4>.

⁶³ "Local and International Determinants of Kosovo's Statehood - Volume II," KFOS, accessed November 21, 2021, https://kfos.org/en/publications/94/local-and-international-determinants-Kosovo*s-statehood-volume-ii.

⁶⁴ "Gashi and Novaković - BRUSSELS AGREEMENTS BETWEEN KOSOVO* AND SERBIA.Pdf," accessed November 21, 2021, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/17009.pdf>.

agreement Kosovo* would be followed by a footnote which states:

“This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence”.*

This paved the way for Kosovo* to participate in several organisations, but

the challenges would remain. While this created circumstances under which Serbia would not block Kosovo* regional perspective, Serbia continued its destructive approach toward Kosovo*.⁶⁵ Furthermore, this agreement regulated Kosovo*-Serbia issue, but it did not address Kosovo*-BiH which remains to date.

The table below shows the agreements and when Kosovo* was allowed to join.

Initiative	Year Established	Kosovo* Joined
South-East European Cooperation Process	1996	2012
South East Europe Transport Observatory	2004	2004
CEFTA	2006	2007
Energy Community Secretariat	2006	2006
Regional Cooperation Council	2008	2013
Brdo-Brijuni	2013	2014
Berlin Process	2014	2014
Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)	2016	2016
Western Balkans Fund		
Mini-Schengen/ Open Balkans	2019	N/A

⁶⁵ Emini and Stakic “Belgrade and Pristina: Lost in Normalisation? | European Union Institute for Security Studies,” accessed November 21, 2021, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/belgrade-and-pristina-lost-normalisation>.

Apart from the externally driven factors, Kosovo's* path in regional cooperation has been also hindered by country's lack of vision and strategy. The list of Kosovo's* membership in regional organisations could be wider and its regional representation more proactive if Kosovo* had been more persistent in pursuing them more strategically. Furthermore, Kosovo* has failed to change its representation within different organisations such as CEFTA, the European Civil Aviation Association, or the South East Europe Transport Observatory (SEETO) where it is still represented under 'UNMIK/Kosovo*'. In 2020, Kosovo's* Prime Minister – Albin Kurti dissatisfied with CEFTA is proposing SEFTA - modelled on the current EFTA-EEA - as a new cooperation platform in which cooperation would include South-East European countries – however he did not de-construct exactly how this mechanism would look like.⁶⁶ Reciprocity measures toward Serbia are part of the public discourse to be used as a political tool pressuring Serbia to change its approach toward Kosovo* in

the Brussels Dialogue.

The regional representation Agreement paved the way for Kosovo* to become part of the Regional Cooperation Council. This provided Kosovo* the opportunity to unlock many regional initiatives and participate with the status of an observer or as a full member. Furthermore, in spite of the challenges, one of the most prominent regional cooperation platforms for Kosovo* was the Berlin Process. This process being initiated by the German Chancellor Angela Merkel offered Kosovo* representation on equal footing with all other countries in the region.⁶⁷ For Kosovo*, Berlin Process did not only include connectivity through project on infrastructure, but it also provided the possibility to link to the region and participate without the reaction of Serbia and B&H, as well as sign agreements albeit represented with the footnote. The opportunity offered was not fully capitalised by Kosovo* due to its internal issues related to political crisis which was manifested with changes of many governments, thus

⁶⁶ "Prime Minister Kurti 's Statement to the Media in Brussels," *Office of the Prime Minister* (blog), June 15, 2021, <https://kryeministri-ks.net/en/prime-minister-kurti-s-statement-to-the-media-in-brussels/>.

⁶⁷ D. Emini"Berlin Process: An Additional Mile toward EU Membership? - Policy Papers - KCSS," accessed November 21, 2021, <http://www.qkss.org/en/Policy-Papers/Berlin-Process-An-additional-mile-toward-EU-Membership-1080>.

leaving Kosovo* without strong leadership and guidance in the process.⁶⁸

Kosovo* is part of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) and the Western Balkans Fund; this marks a milestone in Kosovo's* equal participation but also ownership in regional cooperation. Kosovo* continues to remain a constructive member and contributor in both initiatives.⁶⁹

The finalisation of the Berlin Process borough into life another debatable initiative led by the countries in the region. What started as a trilateral cooperation, the so-called Mini-Schengen which later rebranded into Open Balkans, was considered problematic by the Kosovo* leadership.⁷⁰ The lack of transparency and clear structure as well as objectives of the Open

Balkans, paired by the lack of trust toward the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, the political elite in Prishtina is reluctant to join this initiative. Open Balkans became the reason of the scattered diplomatic relations between Kosovo* and Albania.⁷¹ With the Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama being part of the trilateral initiative, Kosovo* leadership has been caught in between the newly enhanced partnership between Albania and Serbia. Expecting Albania to be keener to cooperation with Kosovo*, the leadership and public opinion in Kosovo* have reacted negatively toward Rama's approach – considered insensitive to the already political complex relations between Kosovo* and Serbia.⁷² In 2020, Kosovo* has been pushed to join Mini-Schengen through the agreement facilitated by the White House – the so-called DC Agreement.⁷³ However, no signs

⁶⁸ D Emini: Berlin Process: Path to Europe or to Nowhere?" "BerlinProcess-Eng_417789.Pdf," accessed November 21, 2021, http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/BerlinProcess-eng_417789.pdf.

⁶⁹ "Local and International Determinants of Kosovo*'s Statehood - Volume II."

⁷⁰ "Kosova Does Not Change Its Position: We Are Outside the Open Balkans Initiative," accessed November 21, 2021, <https://top-channel.tv/english/kosova-does-not-change-its-position-we-are-outside-the-open-balkans-initiative/>.

⁷¹ "Relationship between Berlin Process and Open Balkan Discussed during Merkel's Tirana Visit," *European Western Balkans* (blog), September 15, 2021, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/09/15/relationship-between-berlin-process-and-open-balkan-discussed-during-merkels-tirana-visit/>.

⁷² Alice Taylor, "Albanian Prime Minister Criticises Serbia's 'theatrics' in Kosovo," *www.euractiv.com*, September 27, 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/albanian-prime-minister-criticises-serbias-theatrics-in-kosovo/>.

⁷³ "Kosovo, Serbia Agree To Normalize Economic Ties Following Talks In Washington," accessed November 21, 2021, https://www.rferl.org/a/trump-says-serbia-kosovo*-agree-to-normalize-economic-ties/30821454.html.

have shown toward implementation of that point of the agreement by Kosovo*;

Regional Cooperation remains an important issue looked at thoroughly by the EU in each country report. However, the new changes in the government in Kosovo* brings a certain level of uncertainty on how Kosovo* will navigate in the region. On paper, Kosovo* remains dedicated and open to regional cooperation, however, this narrative must be followed by specific policies and decision by the new government. Regional cooperation is the key for Kosovo* to build partnership in the region and gradually alongside its neighbouring to continue their EU integration path. It is rather delusional to aim at the EU without opening and cooperation in the region firstly.

MONTENEGRO

Montenegro began its path toward independence almost a decade and a half after Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, but its exit from the former union of Serbia and Montenegro

in 2006 was also much more peaceful, reflecting the period of stability and maturity for the entire region. This was very important in shaping its foreign policy position, because it had 15 years of experience of living in “truncated Yugoslavia”. Although opinions on a common state with Serbia in Montenegro are divided, Montenegro had the experience of living in an extremely unbalanced and unequal relationship - territorially, demographically, politically and economically. For the territorially and demographically smallest country in the region, the issue of independence and equality became very important, as well as the awareness that limited resources indicate intensive cooperation in the region, especially in the context of common problems and infrastructure projects.

EU and NATO memberships, as well as good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation were identified very early as key foreign policy goals.⁷⁴ Participation in regional cooperation was motivated by a strong internal pro-EU commitment and inspired by the idea of regional cooperation based on mutual respect and equality, and

⁷⁴ Skupština Crne Gore, “Rezolucija o Načinu, Kvalitetu i Dinamici Procesu Integracija Crne Gore u Evropsku Uniju,” December 27, 2013, http://www.skupstina.me/images/dokumenti/pristupanje-eu/Rezoluciju_o_na%C4%8Dinu_kvalitetu_i_dinamici_procesa_integracija_Crne_Gore_u_Evropsku_uniju.pdf.

identical or similar values. Montenegro recognized EU and NATO memberships as a common point for all countries in the region, where developing regional cooperation is part of the conditions, as well as preparing to participate in the broader integration processes that the EU implies. Approaching EU membership, adopting and introducing EU standards and developing regional cooperation in this context will remain permanently linked.

Its full commitment to these goals has yielded good results relatively quickly – as early as 2010, Montenegro had a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU in place. A positive opinion of the European Commission regarding its membership came a little later the same year, while membership negotiations began in 2012. The SAA further emphasized the obligation of regional cooperation and maintaining good neighbourly relations and provided impetus to the young Montenegrin diplomacy. Montenegro was very active in both directions and its initiatives provided significant contribution to regional cooperation, through the first idea of its

institutionalisation, but also a significant transformation of relations with neighbours, which is a significant step forward that few WB countries can boast with.

The 2013 initiative of the then Prime Minister Igor Lukšić – Western Balkans 6 – is the first and very brave idea of further institutionalisation of regional cooperation. In addition to institutionalising dialogue at the highest political levels, the initiative advocated for a kind of streamlining and functional unification of the existing regional initiatives, i.e. initiatives that represent a sensitive point of the region - migration (MAARI), fight against corruption and organized crime (RAI). The four key points were the establishment of a joint Parliamentary Assembly consisting of 10 members from each country, the appointment of government coordinators for specific initiatives, the establishment of BALPOL⁷⁵, and the abolition of passports as personal documents required for border crossing in the region. Prime Minister Lukšić offered additional clarifications that this does not represent a reconstruction of the former Yugoslavia “which is a wrong concept”,

⁷⁵ “Zapadnobalkanska Šestorka Na Sjednici Generalne Skupštine UN,” *Analitika*, September 17, 2013, <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/115583--zapadnobalkanska-sestorka-na-sjednici-generalne-skupstine-un>.

but a strategic project of common interest that would accelerate EU accession.⁷⁶ As the initiative required the consent of WB6 (or B6 or G6, as Lukšić suggested), it did not come to life. Great satisfaction for Montenegro is that the initiative called Western Balkans Summit (Berlin Process) was launched a year later by German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Montenegro counted on the support of the region for this initiative based on its constructive position in the regional context, but also at the bilateral level. The lessons learned were also important - regional initiatives are easier to accept when coming from outside the region. The Berlin Process and accompanying initiatives enjoy Montenegro's great support because it is believed that more intensive cooperation in specific areas leads to political rapprochement, realisation of economic interests, as well as moving faster towards EU membership.

The country is now a member of 35 regional organizations and initiatives. The EC, which continuously follows the dynamics of fulfilling the obligations stemming from the SAA, gives positive assessment to Montenegro's constructive contribution and commitment.⁷⁷ Although appropriate "coverage" of regional organisations and initiatives requires significantly greater administrative and diplomatic capacity, there is a general satisfaction in Montenegro with the way they manage to represent the region. The most complex tasks are related to periodic presidencies in organizations and initiatives, but as this contributes to greater visibility of Montenegro within these organizations, as well as outside the region, Montenegro engages all resources to perform these tasks. According to the data from the Montenegro MFA, the demanding presidencies during the COVID-19 pandemic were especially

⁷⁶ "Igor Lukšić: Grupa 6 Nije Nikakva Nova Jugoslavija," *Kurir*, September 28, 2013, <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/864203-evropska-unija-trazi-novu-jugoslaviju>.

⁷⁷ European Commission Staff, "Montenegro 2015 Report" (Brussels: European Commission, November 11, 2015), 21, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_montenegro.pdf; European Commission Staff, "Montenegro 2016 Report" (Brussels: European Commission, November 9, 2016), 21, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2016/20161109_report_montenegro.pdf; European Commission Staff, "Montenegro Report 2018" (Strasbourg: European Commission, April 17, 2018), 48, <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417-montenegro-report.pdf>; European Commission Staff, "Montenegro 2019 Report" (Brussels: European Commission, May 29, 2019), 52, <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-montenegro-report.pdf>; European Commission Staff, "Montenegro 2020 Report" (Brussels: European Commission, October 2020), 67, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/montenegro_report_2020.pdf.

successful - the innovative, creative and successful presidency of the CEI continued in 2021⁷⁸, the presidency of the WBF in 2020, and the on-line takeover of the MAARI presidency in June 2020⁷⁹. Since it is the host of ReSPA, in addition to its headquarters, Montenegro used its own investments to provide a training campus. Montenegro is also the first country to provide political support to the initiative aimed at the establishment of the South East European International Institute for Sustainable Technologies (SEEIST)⁸⁰ in 2017, and the establishment of a regional Centre of Excellence based on the state-of-the-art sustainable technology which should assure high competitiveness and contribute to the whole region in terms of technological advances.

Montenegro feels that the scope and intensity of engagement is not adequately recognised in terms of significant regional

positions⁸¹. In addition to rationalizing the number of organisations and initiatives, Montenegro supports the idea of a large agreement in the region on existing functions, aimed at distributing them equally to high-quality and competent candidates. The fact that most regional organizations and initiatives are supported by the EU, and that the EU provides significant funds, but also content and priorities, does not cause special concern, because Montenegro sees the processes as connected and intertwined. Regional ownership is acceptable for Montenegro, but only with European standards and the EU as both goal and means. Smaller regional initiatives, such as the WBF or RYCO, might become self-sustainable, but their activities and visibility would be reduced.

Montenegro is commended as an example of positively transformed relations with its neighbours⁸² as it has profoundly

⁷⁸ The two-year presidency of the CEI is a precedent and occurred for the first time since the establishment of the Initiative.

⁷⁹ <https://www.gov.me/clanak/ucescce-u-regionalnim-inicijativama>

⁸⁰ <https://seeist.eu/>

⁸¹ At the SEECP Summit during the Slovenian Presidency in April 2018, due to the divided position of the members on the candidates, a precedent was set and a decision was made on the consecutive mandates of the RCC Secretary General, first for the Albanian Majlinda Brega (2019-2021) and Igor Lukšić (2022-2024). However, the new Montenegrin government did not support Lukšić's candidacy, and after the procedure, it proposed Irena Radović. The RCC Secretary General appointment procedure is under way.

⁸² Nedžma Džananović, "Foreign Policies in Western Balkans: Alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy," Study, Global and Regional Orders (Sarajevo: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Foreign Policy Initiative BiH, April 2020), 8.

transformed its foreign policy towards its neighbours. Regional cooperation was internalised as a value for itself, which was demonstrated through the investment of large political capital in reconciliation and overcoming the legacy of the 90s. Relations with B&H, Croatia, Albania, and Kosovo* have been given a completely different context thanks to very brave moves - an apology for war crimes in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, expressing readiness to pay war reparations to victims in Croatia, and recognizing Kosovo*⁸³. At the same time, relations with Serbia have changed as well, and they are "continuously unstable and tense"⁸⁴.

With the new Government in place in Montenegro⁸⁵ since December 2020, the foreign policy has not changed dramatically, the foundations have not been shaken, despite occasional mistakes regarding Kosovo*⁸⁶. The cohabitation between

the new Government and president Milo Đukanović has, however, affected the diplomatic apparatus by blocking the nomination of new ambassadors and undermining the existing diplomatic capacities and initiatives that were under way. A large number of significant decisions and positions have been pending for months. Being turned to itself and the growing internal problems made Montenegro's position in the region passive and broke the continuity of some departments and activities.

Montenegro has not joined the Open Balkans initiative, and the opinions of political actors are divided. It remains sceptic, arguing that the new initiative only duplicates the content of the CRM. Also, being the regional frontrunner in the EU integration process, Montenegro is additionally ambivalent towards an initiative that was not designed and launched by the EU. As it creates the division within the

⁸³ Vladimir Vučković, "From a Good Pupil to a Bad Student of the EU Integration Process: Europeanization of Montenegro," in *Balkanizing Europeanization: Fight against Corruption and Regional Relations in the Western Balkans* (Peter Lang, 2019), 164–65.

⁸⁴ Vladimir Vučković, Miloš Vukanović, and Mira Popović, *Good Neighbor: Montenegro and Regional Cooperation*, Democracy and Human Rights (Belgrade: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Regional Office for Serbia and Montenegro, 2020), 14.

⁸⁵ A new government which took office on December 4, 2020, is a coalition founded around the main goal of unseating the decades-ruling DPS party of Montenegrin president Milo Đukanović.

⁸⁶ On several Government documents and invitations to representatives of other governments, the name of Kosovo is accompanied by an asterisk (Kosovo*) used by countries that do not recognise it, or by international organizations whose individual members do not recognise it. However, Montenegro recognized Kosovo's independence in 2008. Although it was speculated, the new Government never made the decision to withdraw the recognition.

country, the initiative is considered divisive for the region as well. A well-intentioned initiative would be inclusive, linked to the EU, set out carefully and via an already existing regional mechanism. Given the current tensions with Serbia, more radical interpretations of the initiative are present in the public discourse, labelling the Open Balkans as a rebranded version of the "Serbian World"⁸⁷. The diplomats, however, remain reserved for this seems to be yet another in a long line of international initiatives for the region that will not live up to expectations, but might come back in some time, rebranded.

Recognizing the contours of continuity, one may expect Montenegro's long-term commitment to regional integration, especially economic, but assuming that they are inclusive, initiated by the EU, instead of regional actors, and that they do not put Montenegro at a disadvantage and an unbalanced position.

NORTH MACEDONIA

North Macedonia had a more peaceful dissolution from Yugoslavia in 1991, which allowed it to start its regional cooperation earlier than the rest of the Yugoslav successor-states. After declaring independence, North Macedonia became a member of the Central European Initiative (CEI) in 1993. In the following years, the focus was put on EU membership. Ultimately, North Macedonia began its formal process of rapprochement with the European Union in 2000, by initiating negotiations about the EU's Stabilisation and Association Process, and it became the first non-EU country in the Balkans to sign the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), on 9 April 2001 in Luxembourg. Despite being the frontrunner in the early 2000s, North Macedonia has faced a rough road to the EU and still has not started the negotiation process. Two crucial agreements have marked North Macedonia EU accession process: Prespa

⁸⁷ Serbian minister of Interior and close collaborator of Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić, Aleksandar Vulin has promoted the controversial idea of formal political and institutional unification of all ethnic Serbs in the region two weeks after the launch of the Open Balkans initiative. It is Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo* that contain most of the population and territories of the imagined "Serb world" as Vulin called it.

Agreement between North Macedonia and Greece signed in 2018 and Treaty on friendship, good neighbourliness and cooperation between North Macedonia and Bulgaria in 2017. However, the EU accession process has been put on hold due to imposed Bulgarian veto on the Negotiation Framework. This situation has put in question the country's EU accession, and the steps that North Macedonia has to overtake in order to become an EU Member State. On the other hand, the public perceives the regional initiatives as a complementary process in which the country should participate while awaiting and working on its internal reforms. Additionally, the conditionality for EU membership relies on the country's active participation and contribution to the RIs. Often, it has been mentioned that the regional initiatives should not become an alternative to the EU membership in moments when this goal seems unreachable.

North Macedonia is home to three organisations: The Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative, the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe, and the Standing Working Group Regional Rural Development operate from Skopje.

CEI is the first initiative in which North Macedonia participated. In 2002 and 2015 the country held the CEI Presidency and organised a Summit of Heads of Governments. North Macedonia was also the organiser of the Economic Forum and a Youth Forum as part of the presidency. Under the Macedonian Presidency of the Central European Initiative in 2015, emphasis was placed on affirming the advantages of the region (agricultural capacities, cultural heritage, tourism etc.) and especially on developing the necessary infrastructure (primarily energy and transport) as the key to the sustainable development of the region which contributes to the economic and security stability of Europe; A significant part was dedicated to the strengthening of business relations in CEI countries through the realisation of the 2015 Business Forum which concluded Macedonia presidency.

As perceived from Macedonian side, the regional initiative that has marked the last years has been the Berlin Process. According to the Macedonian MFA representative *"Berlin Process is not just a single valuable initiative but it is an initiative from which many other regional initiatives were born. We have not seen regional cooperation*

*on such level as the one that has been experienced through the Berlin Process*⁸⁸

Undoubtedly, the Berlin Process has left plenty of positive outcomes for North Macedonia including the people-to-people connectivity that resulted with loosening of the tensions between the members of the region, transport and energy connectivity and the process of bringing closer the WB members that are approximately on the same EU track⁸⁹.

The next step for North Macedonia is the “Open Balkans” initiative, firmly supported by the government of Zoran Zaev. In June 2021, the leaders from Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia met in Skopje to discuss the initiative “Open Balkan”. It envisions open borders and removing of all of the obstacles for free trade and free movement of goods by 2023. North Macedonia so far has maintained good neighbouring relations with all of the WB members. The “Open Balkans” may revert the positive relations with Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo*.

However, the Macedonian government remains confident that the initiative is welcoming to every country that would like to take part.⁹⁰

Another initiative that is considered as a positive example in the region by the Macedonian MFA is the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). According to the Macedonian MFA representative RCC currently as an *“umbrella organisation is making a huge step in combing all of the important topics for the region and finding feasible solutions that are easily noticeable to the people living in these countries.”*⁹¹ The joint communication on highly important topics has presented as efficient complementor to the regional cooperation during the Covid-19 pandemic. RCC on many occasions has risen to the challenge in discussing topics such as human rights and minority protections, environmental protections but also supported the Common Regional Market. (CRM)⁹² For North Macedonia, the CRM is complementing its current internal reforms and enhances the

⁸⁸ Semi-structured interview with a Macedonian MFA representative, July 2021.

⁸⁹ Marciacq Florent The European Union and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process Reflecting on the EU Enlargement in Times of Uncertainty,

⁹⁰ Balkan Insight article, accessed 15.09.2021 <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/29/balkan-mini-schengen-leaders-eye-open-borders-by-2023/>

⁹¹ Semi-structured interview with Macedonian MFA representative, July 2021.

⁹² Semi-structured interview with Macedonian MFA representative, July 13, 2021.

economic cooperation between the WB members. Going back to RCC, the biggest challenge within the regional organisation remains the choice of the leadership. This issue blocks the daily operation of the Council. For the Macedonian MFA this *“the most important issue in the RIs is deciding how to choose the management that will lead the initiatives. The bilateral disputes are leaving a mark on the regional initiatives and eventually reflecting on their achievements”*⁹³. And this problem is also repeating in the MARRI HQ in Skopje.

According to the representative from the Migration Community MARRI has been successful so far because it is led by people who know the region and its flaws and advantages. It represents a communication bridge between the countries in the region. However, MARRI has faced difficulties in operating and implementing its activities, not just because of the management but also because of its finances.⁹⁴

Another important factor in the challenges the RIs are facing is the financing and contributions by the governments. Led by

the example of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), WB members created the Western Balkan Fund⁹⁵. For North Macedonia WBF is especially important for development of the civil sector. Still, WBF does not solve the problem of financing the other RI. According to the representative from a regional initiative *“the administration of the regional initiatives does not plan for increased funds because right now the financing is bad and many of the countries have not fully settled their contributions”* and that *“existence without EU funds would be almost impossible for most of the RIs operating in the region”*⁹⁶. That imposes the question of whether the regional cooperation could solely survive on the incentives and motivation for strengthening the regional cooperation and development by its member countries or EU support will always be required in order to maintain the RIs.

North Macedonia has been quite active in regional cooperation. As the EU enlargement process for North Macedonia is experiencing a stagnation period, regional initiatives remain the best option for devel-

⁹³ Semi-structured interview, July 13, 2021.

⁹⁴ Ibid

⁹⁵ North Macedonia MFA Press Release <https://www.mfa.gov.mk/en/page/9/regional-initiatives>, accessed on 13.09.2021

⁹⁶ Semi-structured interview with a representative from a regional initiative, July 16, 2021.

opment, joint cooperation and strengthening of the region. These initiatives clearly cannot replace EU membership and the North Macedonia government has been clear on that point, however they may keep the country dedicated to improved reforms and bettering the neighbouring relations. Following the example of the two historic treaties, Macedonian institutions, especially the MFA are vocal in the importance of this type of networking, communicating and resolving the region's issues. For the RI, the challenges remain discussable in terms of their management and finance, however even through the pandemic they have remained active and dedicated in achieving their set goals.

SERBIA

In the early 2000s, Serbia has gone through a turbulent road of systematic change and a transitional period behind which laid the idea of EU membership. Despite the fact that Serbia did not initially join the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe in 1999, the Pact played a huge role in supporting the democratic opposition in

removing the then Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević from the government⁹⁷. In the years to follow the Western countries came as strong supporters of the reconciliation processes and insisted on increasing the regional cooperation in the WB through different regional initiatives that would unite the region.⁹⁸ The primary outcome of the establishment and existence of these regional initiatives was foreseen in increased stability and security. Their functioning embodied different topics and issues that would lead the WB on the way to EU membership.

Serbia, together with Montenegro has been a frontrunner in the EU accession process. They have officially applied for European Union membership on 22 December 2009 and the accession negotiations are currently ongoing. Because of the current accession process but also for strengthening the bilateral and multilateral networks on the Balkan peninsula, for Serbia that presents an important incentive to join and actively participate in these initiatives. It is inevitable that after the EU accession process, regional

⁹⁷ Open Society Democracy, Security And The Future Of The Stability Pact For South Eastern Europe <https://esiweb.org/publications/democracy-security-and-future-stability-pact-south-eastern-europe>

⁹⁸ Monitoring Regional Cooperation in South East Europe, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2013

initiatives have been high on the Serbian foreign policy agenda⁹⁹. This attitude can be seen through the Serbian MFA, which has been vocal in the importance of the development of cooperation with other regional cooperation participants from the region, as the basis for maintaining and increasing stability and promoting overall good neighborly relations.¹⁰⁰

Belgrade-Pristina dialog, that marked its 10th anniversary in March 2021, has brought resolution to one particularly imperative battle - Serbia's acceptance of Kosovo's* participation in regional initiatives. This Agreement between Kosovo* and Serbia is supposed to allow Kosovo's* participation and membership in regional organizations, often referred to as the 'footnote agreement'¹⁰¹. It was reached in 2012 and it was a breakthrough for all concerned parties. For the EU¹⁰², this agreement meant that there could be feasible solutions to seemingly intractable problems. Kosovo* found a way for participating in regional initiatives, while for Serbia this Agreement meant candi-

date status for the EU membership. Since then, the regional initiatives have gained a new component, one that allows every WB member to equally participate in the agenda-making and leadership within the variety of regional organisations.

Even during Covid-19, Serbia maintained its engagement in a number of regional cooperation initiatives, such as the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), Energy Community, Transport Community, the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECPP) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). The seat of the Transport Community Treaty was inaugurated in Belgrade in September 2019. The new youth representative of Serbia to the Governing Board of Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) was elected in September 2019. Serbia also participates in the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative, the European Union Macro-Regional Strategies for the Danube Region, the Adriatic and Ionian Region, the Coalition the Commission Tasked with Establishing the Facts about All Victims of War Crimes and Other Seri-

⁹⁹ Commission Staff Working Document, Serbia 2020 Report, 2020 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy

¹⁰⁰ Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Release <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/foreign-policy/eu-integration/regional-initiatives>, accessed 10.09.2021

¹⁰¹ Donika Emini, Kosovo Membership and Representation in Regional Initiatives 2013 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270896394_Kosovo%27s_Membership_and_Representation_in_Regional_Security_Initiatives

¹⁰² James Ker Lindsey, The Significance of Kosovo 2012 <https://www.e-ir.info/2012/03/03/the-significance-of-Kosovo/>

ous Human Rights Violations Committed on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia for Reconciliation Commission (RECOM), the Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA) and the Brdo-Brijuni process. Three regional initiatives are based in Serbia, those being the secretariats of the Education Reform Initiative of South-Eastern Europe, the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons and the Transport.

The variety of regional initiatives in which Serbia participates demonstrates its willingness to contribute to increased regional cooperation. The representative from the Serbian MFA noticed that *“participation in regional initiatives is important because of the regional gap in cooperation that was created in the process of Yugoslavia’s dissolution. These regional initiatives are not limited to the WB only, but also can include countries outside the region, such as the Visegrad group of countries, the Central European Initiative (CEI). The RIs to a certain extent succeeded in their goal to soften the disputes region after the initial turbulences in the 90s, however, they can’t and should not replace the EU accession process”*.¹⁰³ However, Serbia’s participa-

tion is not only limited to cooperation outcomes and conflict resolution. Serbia has also political and economical motivation to advance its regional position. This attitude is also confirmed throughout different media statements by Serbian government representatives.

In terms of stability and security, Serbia is geographically and demographically the biggest country in the region. As such it is highly sensitive to any instability in the region, including soft security threats such as organised crime. In the process of keeping the stability and security in the region intact, the regional organisation Migration, Asylum, and Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI) plays an enormous role. Serbia has been a member of MARRI since it was established in 2003. However, MARRI is facing discrepancies in maintaining its role and achieving results due to the region’s unresolved dispute over MARRI’s future leadership.

Serbia aims high in economic development of the region. Economically, South East European countries are very important commercial partners for Serbia, second only to the EU. Around one-third of Serbia’s exports go to the region, being

¹⁰³ Semi-Structured interview with a MFA representative, August 6, 2021.

a rare case of a Serbian foreign trade surplus. Serbia benefited immensely from the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). The dispute between Belgrade and Pristina was evident in 2018 when Kosovo* imposed 100% customs duty on products imported from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Belgrade considered this as a break of the CEFTA Agreement and the Agreement for Stabilisation and Association. This step has influenced multiple parties including the regional initiatives working in the trade, but also the transport community. According to the representative of the Transport Community, *"the transport market of Serbia won't be sustainable financially, fiscally, environmentally, if that market isn't logically connected to Croatia, on one side, to North Macedonia, on the other, to Bosnia, and everything else. So if we want to have the markets which are striving and ready to use the potential of the investments, we can only do it as a region, a region connected in itself but also, as in our case, a region connected with the EU"*¹⁰⁴. That would mean that any imposed measures

to only certain WB countries influence the work of many regional initiatives which ultimately leads to failures in their work. Lately, the focus of the public has been pointed towards the initiative "Open Balkans" that includes Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania. This initiative gained a lot of reactions due to the fact that the other WB members are not willing to participate and consider it as non-inclusive.¹⁰⁵ For Serbia, this initiative actualised the current economical development of these three countries and therefore embodies their current economic ties.

Finally, Serbia's political will for regional cooperation derives from its EU accession process. A crucial regional initiative, is the Berlin process¹⁰⁶. Serbian PM Ana Brnabic considers it not just as *"a means for regional economic development but also as a concept of connecting the Western Balkans and bringing them closer to the EU"*¹⁰⁷. Berlin Process did have multiple achievements. For Serbia, its achievements include the RYCO office and selected Board Member representing Ser-

¹⁰⁴ Semi-structured interview with a Serbian MFA representative, August 6, 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Donika Emini Kosovo Membership and Representation in Regional Security Initiatives 2013 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270896394_Kosovo*%27s_Membership_and_Representation_in_Regional_Security_Initiatives

¹⁰⁶ European Western Balkans, Relation between Berlin Process and Open Balkans <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/09/15/relationship-between-berlin-process-and-open-balkan-discussed-during-merkels-tirana-visit/>

¹⁰⁷ Serbian Government Press Release , accessed 10.09.2021 <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/175407/serbia-strongly-supports-berlin-process.php>

bia, but also the idea to continue the Berlin Process on the level of “Open Balkans”. Despite its achievements, the regional disputes surrounding the selection of leadership remain the main problem of the functioning within the RIs¹⁰⁸. The political issues, especially noticeable in the Belgrade-Pristina communication during the Berlin Process Summit in Vienna in 2015. There, the governments committed themselves to a resolution of all open bilateral questions in the spirit of good neighbourliness and shared commitment to EU integration, but often failed to execute.

Serbia has been actively participating in a variety of RIs that are important for the country’s political and economic development. A challenge for the Serbian administration, also noticeable in the other 6 WB members is the capacity to follow through every RIs. This problem influences the incentive for joining new initiatives and creates a scepticism among the administration of the value of the regional initiatives and on the side of the RIs this issue means lack of communication and one-way implementation of their agenda.

¹⁰⁸ BPRG Policy Report The Berlin Process for the Western Balkans: Gains and Challenges for Kosovo*, https://balkansgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/THE-BERLIN-PROCESS-FOR-THE-WESTERN-BALKANS_GAINS-AND-CHALLENGES-FOR-KOSOVO*_WEB_FINAL-1.pdf

4. Regional cooperation during Covid-19 pandemics

The Covid-19 outbreak in March 2020 coincided with the last ministerial meeting of the Berlin Process' participants held with physical presence in Skopje, marking the beginning of the process' very first co-presidency between an EU member state – Bulgaria and a candidate country – North Macedonia. Despite the pledges the high officials made in Skopje pertaining to increased and deepened regional cooperation, as well as intensified integration of the WB into the EU, the Coronavirus breakout made the national interests in managing the health crisis an absolute priority. At first, the WB were primarily driven by their self-interest and acting on their own, preoccupied with localizing the spread of the virus, the sustainability of the healthcare systems, and the medical gear and vaccine procurement. The process of regional cooperation and reconciliation was put on hold, while the work of the regional organizations and initiatives was significantly severed. Only the well-established regional organizations and initiatives, both in terms of human and

financial resources, managed to adapt to the new situation by demonstrating flexibility and innovation in their daily operations.

However, very soon the WB leaders decided to act united in the fight against the Coronavirus, including their common appeals for assistance from the EU. The presidents of the parliaments in the region, followed by the ministers of foreign affairs made joint requests for medical help. Furthermore, the WB parties formally asked to be included in the EU Joint Procurement Agreement for medical and protective equipment and negotiated the unused Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) funds for combatting the pandemics. In response, Brussels provided more than 3 billion euros for fighting Covid-19 in the region, while, in October 2020, the European Commission agreed on an all-inclusive Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, aimed at stimulating a long-term post-Covid economic recovery of the region by endorsing a green and digital transition, as well as intensifying the regional integration and convergence with the European Union.

One of the highlights of the regional cooperation in this period was the establishment of Green Corridors which eased the supply of goods from the EU to the WB, the other

way around, as well as within the region. The Western Balkan parties, as well as the regional organizations, played a prominent role in this initiative as it was agreed by the CEFTA Secretariat, RCC, Transport Community, Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement (DG NEAR), Directorate-General for Taxation and Customs (DG TAXUD), and the WB governments. Furthermore, in November 2020, the leaders from the region adopted the Action Plan for the CRM 2021-2024, as well as the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans at the Western Balkan Summit in Sofia. The commitments made in these documents aim to intensify trade and investments, by making the region more attractive to foreign investors and economically more converged with the EU. Another positive example of solidarity was the donation of vaccines within the region, as well as the possibility of immunization of citizens of one WB party in another. Last, although not Covid-19-related, the WB parties agreed to abolish the roaming charges for the users in the region, effective July 1, 2021.

As the regional integration in the WB is deeply entangled with the process of EU enlargement, the post-Covid recovery is expected to primarily focus on the priorities set by the Economic and Investment Plan

for the Western Balkans. To keep up with the EU, the region will have to increase its economic convergence with the bloc, but also foster competitiveness and invest in inclusive growth, good governance, sustainable connectivity, digitalization, and green economy – fields in which the WB are already lagging behind the EU and in which Covid-19 caused major disruptions.

Another topic of the post-Covid development and increased regional interest is the nearshoring potential of the WB. The coronavirus caused unprecedented interruptions of the global supply chains. One of the possible alternatives to prevent future disruptions of this type is the diversification, shortening, and re-localization of global supply chains in the WB, hand in hand, with the EU accession process with resilient and strategically autonomous Europe as an end goal. Besides the EU, Western Balkan academia and civil society, regional organizations, and initiatives, such as RCC, CEFTA, WB6 CIF, and the Transport Community have already been assessing the possibilities for nearshoring the supply chains in the region, and it is a question of time when the Western Balkan parties will formally raise the issue on the political agenda.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Western Balkans national actors are particularly interested in regional cooperation, they recognize it as one of priorities and value highly already identified benefits, as well as its potential. However, they still remain sensitive to certain political developments and concepts and, for a number of reasons, they keep many bilateral unresolved. It can be expected that the advancement of regional cooperation would remain one of their genuine authentic foreign affairs priorities in the future. The narrative based on the establishment of links, reconciliation, stabilization and cooperation in the process of getting closer to the EU, has been pretty fulfilled, and now a new vision and vision drivers need to be found. The views of citizens who are positive towards regional cooperation¹⁰⁹ represents a great political capital, but also an obligation. It is a very clear indicator of a political orientation that would have justification and legitimacy.

- 1. The MFA's and respective governments need to consider regional cooperation as a value and gain *per se*. In view of uncertainty and the long-term prospect of the EU membership, WB parties need to define desired outcomes of the regional cooperation and respond to the issue of a kind of a region they want, even if the perspective of EU membership remains only a distant prospect.**

Although over more than twenty years the whole region has gone through a turbulent and long way towards a lasting stabilisation and transformation of their relations it is evident that a great number of open bilateral issues have not been resolved yet and that they represent a long-term burden and obstacle to the establishment of political trust that is indispensable for further steps in the regional cooperation.

- 2. Even if a major progress in resolving bilateral issues seems impossible, in the short run, there are no obstacles for MFAs to propose plans of measures aimed at building trust with neighbours that could lead to a more**

¹⁰⁹ "Balkan Public Barometer 2021 Public Opinion," Analytical Report (Sarajevo: Regional Cooperation council, June 2021), https://www.rcc.int/download/docs/Balkan_Barometer_Public_opinion_2021v4.pdf/58fbd4eeb4187c20349f83f23b0048b.pdf.

significant progress and the creation of trust. The plans of measures of trust-building do not necessarily have to offer the ways to resolve open issues but need to consider and contribute to the probabilities of de-escalation.

For the WB parties, the EU is a common vision and ever compelling theme. The contribution of the EU to the regional cooperation in the WB is immense, as it often provides the inspiration, content, context, as well as funding.

3. Although an increase in costs is not a popular option, a gradual rise of the financial obligations towards regional organizations and initiatives, may give impetus to a stronger sense of local ownership, responsibility for processes and activities, as well as the need to recognise and gain concrete benefits in regional cooperation and initiatives. Those opportunities need to be applied first and foremost on the financially less demanding memberships, such as WBF or RYCO. One of the ways of obtaining additional funds may be a diversification of sources for financing and development of cooperation

with other interested donors, within or beyond the EU, which would secure additional capacities of the state.

Concrete benefits that can be gained through organizations and initiatives, and the focus of member parties on cost effectiveness of their engagement in regional organizations, yield multiple benefits. However, they also imply preparation, planning, allocation of additional resources and investment in developing a position within a concrete organisation and initiative.

Warnings that WB parties become passive in regional developments, each for different reasons, along with belated activities and hesitant reactions may have serious consequences. WB parties have both their rights and obligations within regional organizations and initiatives, and need to upgrade their capacities so they can participate, on equal grounds, in the shaping of final outcomes more actively.

4. The need for a more dynamic participation of WB parties in the context of regional cooperation implies, first and foremost, a development of national operational strategy/ goals of activities for each regional organisation and initiative. Based

on defined goals, the additional resources (human and material) need to be secured for their realisation, as well as for the consolidation and for a better coordination within the set framework, e.g., an establishment of operational and coordination teams of an inter-sectoral nature. The MFAs must take up central roles in such coordination and in securing the flow of information and political guidance.

5. National representatives in the regional organisations and initiatives need to have clear and measurable goals, clear instructions and rules, better coordination mechanism within one country, followed by significant improvements in efficiency of information exchange mechanisms.

The number of regional organizations and initiatives is growing. New ideas are being born and consequently the need for cooperation, but there are also initiatives that have lost their meaning and narrative. A great number of them only duplicate the content and additionally burden fragile diplomatic and administrative capacities of WB parties.

6. The MFAs of the WB parties, in cooperation with respective governments, the EU, and other international partners and donors should assess the work of the existing regional organizations and initiatives and offer policy recommendations for the rationalization of their work by increasing their efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, visibility, promoting complementarity, and avoiding overlaps of activities and responsibilities. The realization of this task in WB parties requires the MFAs to take the lead and engage strongly with other sectors, within which the projects and activities of regional cooperation are carried out.
7. Streamlining, restructuring of the existing organizations and initiatives, and their bodies and decision-making processes, renewed negotiations on multilateral agreements and mechanisms, require intensive cooperation and coordination between WB parties. It is a demanding, but not an impossible task. The initiation of this process itself may improve the mechanisms of cooperation, even before solutions are offered.

8. The MFAs of the WB parties should agree upon a sustainable and undisputable formula of representation and participation of the Western Balkan parties in the regional organizations and initiative to ensure their uninterrupted work and enhance regional cooperation, reconciliation, and integration. The agreed principles should provide an equitable representation of candidates from all the countries, and thus increase their visibility, but also enhance ownership.
9. Joint activities and coordination among the members aimed at the improvement of the process of regional cooperation may lead to the consolidation of common positions towards the EU in the context of concrete initiatives and issues of a mutual interest.
10. The ministries of foreign affairs should support post-Covid cooperation, reconciliation, and integration with a clear goal of full integration of the Western Balkan economies, institutions, legislations, policies, and societies in the EU structures before their dates of accession.
11. The ministries of foreign affairs should ensure that the post-Covid regional cooperation, reconciliation, and integration is fully in line with the objectives set in the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans, Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, as well as the obligations arising from the commitments made under the auspices of the Berlin Process, irrespective of its future format.
12. The ministries of foreign affairs should actively encourage the regional organizations and institutions to promote the regional ownership of the activities and processes of regional cooperation, reconciliation, and integration in the Western Balkans, aimed at achieving a resilient region with a strong regional identity, immune to the bilateral disputes and beyond yet in line with the EU integration process.

Annex – List of Regional Organizations and Initiatives in the Western Balkans

Table 1. List of regional organizations and initiatives in the Western Balkans

Area of work	Name and abbreviation
COMPETITIVENESS	Black Sea Economic Council (BSEC)
	Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)
	South East European Centre for Entrepreneurial Learning (SEECEL)
	South East Europe Investment Committee (SEEIC)
	Steering Platform for Research for the Western Balkans (WBC-RTI)
	Task Force on Culture and Society (TFCS RCC)
	Western Balkans Enterprise Development and Innovation Facility (WB EDIF)
	Western Balkans Fund (WBF)
	Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF)
	Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum (WB6 CIF)
	Western Balkans Research and Innovation Centre (WISE)

CONNECTIVITY	Energy Community (EC)
	Electronic South Eastern Europe Initiative (e-SEE)
	Global Water Partnership – Mediterranean (GWP-Med)
	Open Balkans
	Regional Environmental Centre (REC)
	Sava Commission (Sava Comm.)
	Transport Community (TC)
	Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group in SEE (SWG-RRD)
	Regional Working Group on Environment (WGE)
FIGHT AGAINST ORGANIZED CRIME	Police Cooperation Convention for South East Europe (PCC SEE)
	South East European Prosecutors Advisory Group (SEEPAG)
	Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre (SELEC)
	Southeast Europe Police Chiefs Association (SEPCA)

GOOD GOVERNANCE	Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South East Europe (NALAS)
	Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration (NISPA)
	Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative (RAI)
	Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA)
	Regional Working Group on Justice (WGJ)
	South East European Law School Network (SEELS)
SECURITY	Adriatic Charter (A-5)
	Centre for Security Cooperation (RACVIAC)
	Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South Eastern Europe (DPPI SEE)
	Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC)
	Regional Housing Programme (RHP)
	Regional Platform for Countering Radicalisation and Violent Extremism Leading to Terrorism and Foreign Terrorist Fighters in SEE (CVE-FTF Platform)
	Southeast European Defence Ministerial Process (SEDM)
	South East European Military Intelligence Chiefs Forum (SEEMIC)
South East European National Security Authorities Forum (SEENSA)	
South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC)	

LABOUR AND SOCIAL MOBILITY	Balkan Civil Society Network (BCSDN)
	Centre of Public Employment Services (CPESSEC)
	European Network of Public Employment Services (EN PES)
	Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE)
	Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP)
	Joint Working Group on Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications (JWGMRPQ)
	Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI)
	Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)
	Social Agenda 2020 Regional Working Group (SAWG)
	South Eastern Europe Health Network (SEEHN)
	Western Balkans Platform on Education and Training (WBPET)
MULTIPLE AREAS OF WORK	Adriatic-Ionian Initiative (AII)
	Berlin Process
	Cross-Border Cooperation Programmes (CBC)
	Central European Initiative (CEI)
	Conference of the European Integration Parliamentary Committees of States Participating in the Stabilisation and Association Process (COSAP)
	Transnational Cooperation Programmes (TCP)
	Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)
	South East European Cooperation Initiative (SECI)
	South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP)
	SEECP Parliamentary Assembly (SEECP PA)
	Western Balkans Platform on Education and Training (WBPET)

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Information about the International Visegrad Fund

The Visegrad Fund is an international donor organization, established in 2000 by the governments of the Visegrad Group countries—Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia to promote regional cooperation in the Visegrad region (V4) as well as between the V4 region and other countries, especially in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership regions. The Fund does so by awarding €8 million through grants, scholarships and artist residencies provided annually by equal contributions of all the V4 countries. Other donor countries (Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States) have provided another €10 million through various grant schemes run by the Fund since 2012.

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Information about THINK BALKANS

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The 'Cooperation Instrument for the Western Balkans Think Tanks – THINK BALKANS' project is financially supported by the International Visegrad Fund and builds upon the previously established cooperation between the members of the Southeast European Think Net Network (SEE Think Net) and Think Visegrad as part of the 'Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans: The Berlin Process and Visegrad Group in comparison project'.

Following the successful past cooperation, the **Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” – Skopje (IDSCS)** is the project coordinator, which, in collaboration with the **European Movement in Serbia (EMinS)**, **Platforma CiviKos** from Kosovo, **Politikon Network** from Montenegro, **Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS)** from Albania, **Humanity in Action Bosnia and Herzegovina** from Bosnia and Herzegovina, **Centre for European Perspective (CEP)** from Slovenia, **Centre for Eastern Studies from Poland (OSW)**, **Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade from Hungary (IFAT)**, the **Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (RC SFPA)** from Slovakia, and **EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy (EUROPEUM)** from the Czech Republic, will work in achieving the project's goals.

The project duration is 15 months, that is, from October 2020 to January 2022.

Modelling on the Think Visegrad – V4 Think Tank Platform and closely cooperating with it, this project aims to pilot an instrument for the permanent cooperation of Western

Balkan (WB) think tanks by 1) strengthening the cooperation of think tanks in V4 countries with WB think tanks/analytical institutions; 2) promoting V4 cooperation among experts / policy makers in the WB as a successful regional model open to experience sharing with countries wishing to join the EU; 3) offering V4 expertise on regional cooperation that can help strengthen regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, which represents a crucial aspect of the region's European integration; 4) providing a new platform for strengthening people-to-people links between analytical institutions, think tanks, government institutions from the V4 and the Western Balkans; 5) cultivating inter-regional cooperation between V4 and WB6 on issues of common strategic interest; and 6) encouraging the use of V4 know-how gained through Think Visegrad to help improve dialogue between the relevant state institutions in the WB countries (e.g. between the foreign ministries as well as between the WB think tanks and NGOs and the WB MFAs).

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