The EU enlargement before regional cooperation in the Western Balkans?

The proliferation of initiatives and the role of the Berlin Process

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INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) is currently experiencing a crucial phase in its enlargement process, influenced by recent geopolitical shifts and internal factors which have sparked renewed discussions on Europe's future. With regards to the Western Balkans (WB), promises of accession have hit the rocks of stagnating democratic reforms whilst recent EU member state's reluctance to expand has marched in lockstep with local populations' disaffection towards the EU.

Since the end of the Yugoslav conflicts, regional cooperation has been a key element of the EU Stabilization and Association process for the WB launched in 1999, conceived as a way to overcome the tragic legacies of the wars. Once the perspective of European integration was formalised at the Thessaloniki EU/WB summit in 2003, regional cooperation became a central component of the EU conditionality for the accession. The underlying idea was that by resolving disputes and fostering collaboration, regional cooperation would potentially lead to a "ripple effect" across a broad spectrum of policy areas - enhancing political cooperation, strengthening regional security, and ultimately contributing to greater stability and economic growth.

Today, the approach to regional integration transcends security frameworks and increasingly focuses on economic integration. It involves complex interactions among a wide range of societal actors, including businesses, political institutions, and civil society organisations. Most recent trends also link regional economic cooperation to gradual integration of WB candidate countries in the EU single market, considering them mutually reinforcing tracks that could boost the enlargement agenda.

Many initiatives have been launched overtime to stimulate regional cooperation. Among them the most significant is arguably the Berlin Process, launched in 2014 by a group of EU member states under Germany's initiative and focused on the promotion of economic cooperation.

This research starts from mapping and examining the various regional cooperation efforts undertaken in the WB in the last 30 years. It provides a specific analysis of the Berlin Process that celebrates its 10th year of activity, comparing it to other initiatives and exploring the results it has achieved since its inception. It looks in particular at the implication of the EU conditionality and at the ownership of regional cooperation by local political actors.

More specifically, the first chapter offers a synthetic excursus of regional cooperation in the WB followed by the mapping of the last 20 years of initiatives addressing regional cooperation. It includes an analysis of relevant data to provide quantitative evidence of trends and likely results. The second chapter is focused on the Berlin Process and presents the findings of a literature review, a set of interviews with experts from the region and the direct participation to the Civic Society Forum in Tirana (2023) and Skopje (2024). The third chapter focuses on attempts at creating a common regional market under the framework of the BP and explores the latest proposals to link it to the gradual integration in the EU single market, also taking into

account the recently adopted Growth Plan for the WB. The final chapter summarises the key issues discussed and provides some policy recommendations based on the key findings of the study.

Methodology

To understand to what extent the EU's conditionality on regional cooperation among the WB countries encouraged their actual cooperation and local ownership, the research project included different activities and outputs. The research teams first carried out desk research reviewing the existing literature, from academic articles to secondary documents and media coverage; they then focused on mapping and classifying existing regional cooperation initiatives and platforms, through online and offline searches based on a matrix jointly developed by OBCT and CeSPI. They carried out three semi-structured interviews with area experts and took part in the Civil Society Forum (CSF) of the BP in October 2023 in Tirana and July 2024 in Skopje. Finally, they organised a webinar to contribute to debating and knowledge-sharing with the interested public.

Chapter 1: An Excursus Of Regional Cooperation In The Western Balkans

Sabina de Silva, CeSPI

The history of regional cooperation in the WB can be divided into four phases. The first one, coinciding with the end of the Cold War and the increase in global economic integration, saw the relaunch of regional dimension as a way to conduct foreign relations, in a trend called "*new regionalism*"[1]. This push for regionalism resulted in initiatives such as the **Central European Initiative** (CEI) in 1989 – an Italian-Austrian proposal - and the **Black Sea Economic Cooperation** (BSEC) in 1992 – a Turkish proposal. These initiatives were aimed at managing the common regional space and establishing cooperation at both political and economic level. However, this New Regionalism suffered a setback with the rise of nationalism and the outburst of the Yugoslav Wars.

After the Dayton Agreement, cooperation initiatives were elaborated with the idea of promoting peace, with regional activities primarily focused on reconciliation, security and stability[2]. In 1996, three distinct initiatives were introduced: the first one was the **Royaumont Process for Stability and Good Neighbourliness,** launched by France. The project aimed at creating a multilateral dialogue between government institutions and representatives of civil society – including journalists, academics, and NGOs – and involved 5 countries from WB[3],

[1] Anastasakis O., Bojicic-Dzelilovic V. (2002) Balkan regional cooperation & European integration. Policy papers (2). Hellenic Observatory, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, U.K.
[2] Minić J (2013) The dynamics and context of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, International issues & Slovak foreign policy affairs. Vol. 22, no. 4 (2013), s. 21-39.
[3] Albania, the Former Republic of Yugoslavia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

15 EU member states[4], Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Turkey, the Russian Federation, the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The project was later adopted by the European Council and incorporated into the Stability Pact.

In parallel, the region responded with the **South East European Cooperation Process** (SEECP), launched by Bulgaria. SEECP focused on political cooperation and covered a wide range of sectors including security, economic, and cultural cooperation. The main purpose of the initiative was to provide a political forum of discussion for national leaders, who could demonstrate their commitment through the adoption of common positions. However, it had limited impact, mostly producing vague and generalised declarations.

Finally, the **Southeast European Cooperative Initiative** (SECI), launched by the USA, marked a turning point in the history of regional cooperation. SECI sought to achieve reconciliation through economic means: the main goal was to support the implementation of the Dayton Agreement by reconstructing war-torn national economies in the fields of infrastructure, transport, energy and so on. Previous initiatives in the region had mainly focused on meetings at political level, suffering from small operational budgets and limited project implementation and a lack of mechanisms to evaluate their impact and effectiveness. In contrast, SECI was able to produce practical achievements and pragmatic results, due to the small number of priorities and the higher availability of private funds. For example, SECI actively encouraged the collaboration among other regional initiatives through consultative meetings with the coordinators of CEI and BSEC[5]. Over the years, SECI worked with several regional institutes and think tanks - such as the Austrian Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe and the Italian Centro Studi Nord Est - and international organisations, both implementing projects - such as the United Nations Center for International Crime Prevention, the United Nations Development Program and the United Nations Environment Program - and participating in a wide variety of international meetings. SECI was also at the forefront of the Kosovo crisis, organising a high-level conference on the "Priorities of the SECI Participating States for Implementing the EU Stability Pact" in October 1999. The conference resulted in a set of priority projects on transport, trade, energy and the environment.

At the beginning of the new millennium, with the end of the Kosovo war and the achievement of relative stability in the region, regional cooperation entered a new phase. The local demand for regional cooperation in strategic areas such as security, trade and energy aligned with UE efforts to prepare the Balkan states for future accession, leading to a proliferation of regional cooperation initiatives. The **Stability Pact for South East Europe**, established in 1999 at the initiative of the EU, and the instrument of the **Stabilisation and Association Process** were key outcomes of this joint effort. The Stability Pact aimed to provide a diplomatic alternative for the resolution of the disputes in the region, this is why the promoters adopted an inclusive

[4] Germany, France, Italy, Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Denmark, Ireland, United Kingdom, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Austria, Finland, Sweden.

[5] Dominese G. (2000) Economic and regional cooperation in Southeast Europe: The SECI study case. Obstacles, disincentives and perspectives of Italian foreign direct investment in the Danubian/Adriatic Region, ERSA conference papers

approach, including the other South East European post-communist countries. When Romania and Bulgaria left the Stability Pact after they joined the EU in 2007, it was replaced by the **Regional Cooperation Council** (RCC) in 2008, with a specific focus on former Yugoslavia, plus Albania.

In 2003, the Thessaloniki EU–WB Summit marked a turning point: for the first time, the WB were given an explicit European perspective and regional cooperation became a precondition for European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The active promotion of regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations, as well as the creation of a free trade area, became part of the conditionality for European membership. In the following decade, regional cooperation was driven primarily by external inputs, with peaks in activity between 2011 and 2014. During this period, the main drivers of regional cooperation were Croatia's proactive role in promoting new initiatives - preparing for its entry into the EU in 2013; the efforts of the **RCC**; and the need to address the new security challenges arising from the 2014 migration crisis.

Unfortunately, those were the years when the emerging enlargement fatigue became apparent. In September 2014, the then-President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, changed the title of the Commissioner from "Enlargement and Neighbourly Relations" to "Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement", announcing that no further expansion would be expected in the next five years[6].

In this context, Germany launched the **Berlin Process (BP),** an intergovernmental regional initiative aimed at giving a new momentum to the languishing enlargement process. The BP's main goal was to provide a new framework for closer regional cooperation based on three main pillars: economic growth and connectivity, democracy and rule of law, and resolution of bilateral disputes.

From the BP onward, regional cooperation entered a new phase marked by several key elements. The EU, due to enlargement fatigue, pushed for greater attention to internal coordination among the WB6[7], especially on security issues, political and administrative coordination and mutual recognition of professional qualification - supported by the activity of RCC and SEECP.

Secondly, there has been a gradual emergence of regionally driven initiatives, typically involving only a subset of countries within the region. An example is the establishment of the **Open Balkans** (OB) economic and political zone in 2021, which includes Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia. Although the OB is recognized as a significant accomplishment among locally initiated projects, serving as an alternative to EU-led cooperation, the absence of Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro has generated considerable skepticism. This initiative, spearheaded by WB leaders such as Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and

[6] European Commission (2014), The Juncker Commission: A strong and experienced team standing for change https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_14_984.
[7] Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia.

Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, seems to suggest that regional efforts are undertaken primarily when they align with domestic political interests[8].

Moreover, recent years have shown a renewed emphasis on reconciliation involving new actors previously excluded from the political debate, such as the **Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)** founded in 2016.

Another notable case has been the SEE 2020 Strategy developed by the RCC which constitutes the most comprehensive regional strategy assisting local governments to implement their development plans to align with the EU acquis in the field of environment, health, transport and labour market.

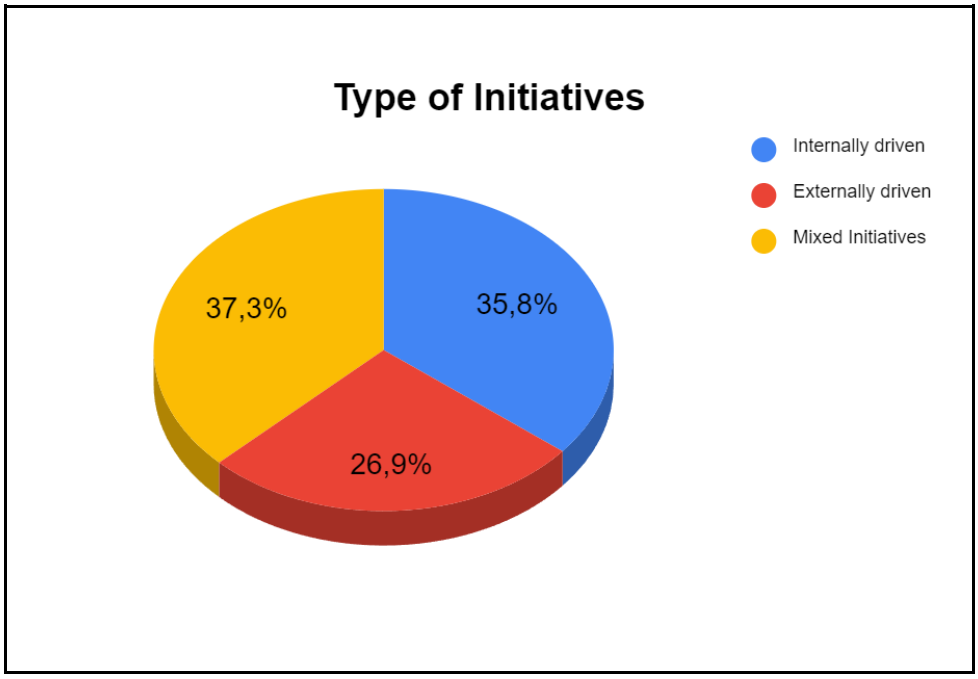
1.1 Mapping of active regional initiatives

The previous paragraph has shown a slow but consistent increase in **locally owned initiatives**: while earlier the impetus for cooperation was driven by external actors with the main objective of stabilising the region, in recent decades there has been a proliferation of initiatives spontaneously arising within the region.

The mapping of 67 regional initiatives from 1989 to date, including 64 currently active (see annex 1) shows that they are mostly jointly promoted by the WB and the EU (37%) or they derive from a regional impetus (36%). 27% of the initiatives come exclusively from external input (EU, US, and third countries). The EU is currently the most active external partner, participating in 16 of the 67 mapped initiatives (Fig. 1).

[8] Sava Mirković (2024), Open Balkan, a failed step in the right direction, OBCT https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Balkans/Open-Balkan-a-failed-step-in-the-right-direction-232590.

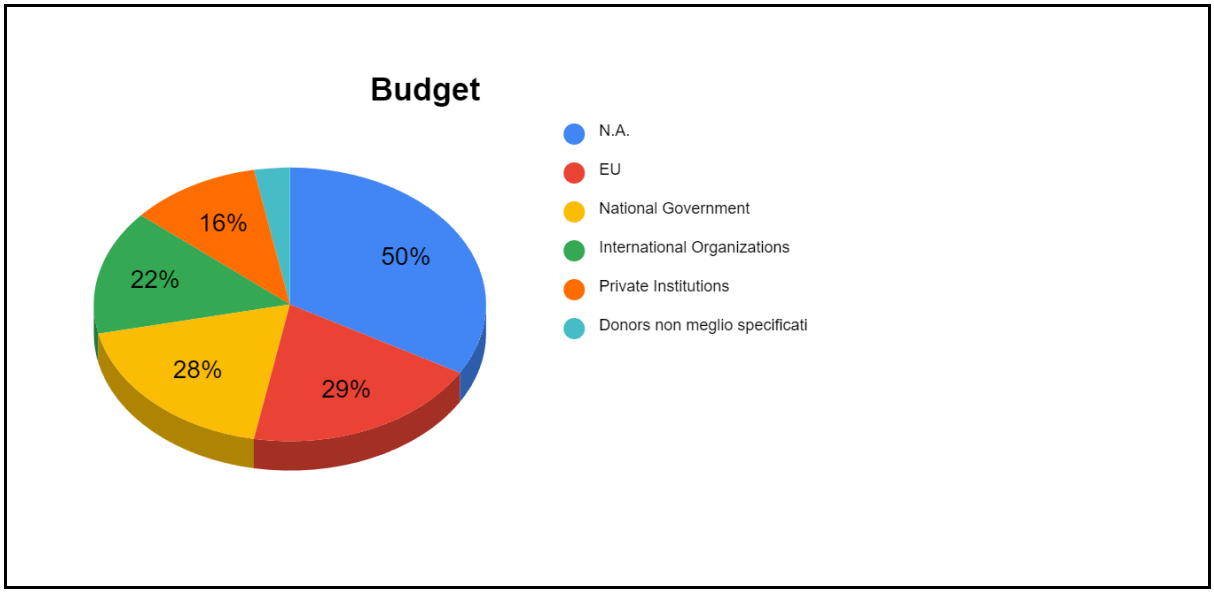
Fig. 1 Type of initiatives



Source: *Elaboration based on secondary sources and literature review*

The **promise of possible future membership** has been the keystone for the development of regional cooperation and, along with the **financial assistance** provided by the EU and the subsequent **conditionality** required, it represents the main booster for stability efforts and reform processes. The European Commission, together with local governments, is indeed the largest financial contributor to cooperation, covering almost 30% of all initiatives. The role of international institutions (22%) and private credit institutions (16%) is also important (Fig. 2)

Fig.2 Budget



Source*: Elaboration based on secondary sources and literature review*

Kosovo participates in only 50% of the initiatives: it is quite telling that no regional initiatives have their headquarters in Pristina.

Over the years there has also been a change in **the thematic priorities** of cooperation: the end of the conflict, or at least the precarious balance achieved with the freezing of some important issues, made the theme of reconciliation take second place. The only three initiatives to explicitly refer to reconciliation are the **Regional Housing Programme initiative** in 2011, **Regional Youth Cooperation Office** (RYCO) in 2016, **WB Fund** in 2017, making room for more pressing needs. At present, most of the initiatives (47%) focus on regional security and stability (meant as fight against terrorism, radicalisation and border control). Economic development (34%) and political coordination (17%) are paramount as well. In recent years, WB countries have also introduced forms of cooperation within the framework of cyber security – such as the ***Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre*** – and gender issues – such as **the Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship**, born from the synergy between RCC and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The existence of common issues and goals, such as security and economic development, along with the new geopolitical situation that has brought the region and its dynamics back into the spotlight, may be contributing to the formulation of a regional identity and fostering the awareness that common problems require collective actions. Infrastructure, transport, energy, corruption and illegal migration are now on the top of the political agenda of national leaders in the WB. In a reverse path compared to what happened for the EU, born as an economic community then transformed into political integration, for the WB region the awareness of the need for stronger political coordination in order to achieve common objectives is leading to economic cooperation.

In the last decades, it is possible to distinguish two different trends: the abovementioned transition from external owned to locally owned initiatives and the increase of bottom-up initiatives – namely initiatives promoted by the actors of the civil society and professional associations - rather than top-down initiatives – promoted by governments.

The second trend can be explained by the increasing consensus of the population for regional cooperation. According to the 2023 Balkan Barometer, 76% of the WB citizens believe that regional cooperation can contribute to improving the political, economic and security situation in their country- with the exception of respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina who have little trust in regional cooperation as a useful instrument (30%)[9]. The positive attitude is particularly strong among young people (18-24): 76% of them openly support regional cooperation.

Bottom-up initiatives are mostly sectorial, based on the common interest in developing cooperation in specific areas such as public administration, education & research and commerce.

[9] Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Balkan Barometer 2023, Public Opinion, June 2023.

There are two examples of **bottom-up initiatives that are externally driven**, both instituted with the aim of overcoming the underdevelopment of public administration and of democratic governance in the WB, which are recognised as two main obstacles to the EU membership of the candidate countries. The first, the Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe (**NISPACEE)**, established in 1994 in Bratislava, which cover 5 geographic areas that share a communist past: countries that joined the EU from 2004 onwards; Central and Eastern Europe; WB; Central Asia; Caucasus.

The other one is the Regional School of Public Administration (**RESPA)**, established in 2010 in Montenegro. RESPA is supported by the EU and embraces all the WB6 – although Kosovo has only the status of beneficiary and has no representation in the governing board. RESPA contributes to the work of NISPACEE with policy papers and reports presented during the NISPACEE Annual Conferences.

On the other hand, one of the best examples of **bottom-up, locally owned initiatives** is the WB6 Chamber Investment Forum **(WB6 CIF),** developed in 2017 by the Chambers of commerce and industry from the WB to facilitate business dialogue and attract investment in the region. WB6 CIF has a permanent secretariat and its budget is based on contributions from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBDR), the RCC and the membership fees of each member. Over the years, the annual meetings of WB6 CIF have offered the opportunity for the delegation of the participating states to share a common space free from political pressure in order to cooperate more closely in the business field – one example is the bilateral meeting between the Chamber of Commerce of Kosovo and Serbia during the WB6 CIF Managing Board in 2023.

Other forms of virtuous bottom-up and locally owned cooperation are seen in the field of security and education. The **Southeast Europe Police Chiefs Association (SEPCA)** was formed in 2002 to strengthen police cooperation at regional level in the fight against organised crime. SEPCA has no permanent Secretariat, but a Presidency that rotates annually. The SEE Law School Network **(SEELS)** has been established by the Law Schools from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia to improve scientific and administrative cooperation between the Law Faculties in the region. SEELS has a permanent Secretariat, its budget derives from membership fees, private and public sources and holds partnership with, among other, RCC and Western Balkans Fund (WBF).

Generally, bottom-up locally owned initiatives have the merit of bringing together citizens of the countries involved, contributing to creating a more proactive and vibrant civil society, and they tend to guarantee the continuity of the projects beyond electoral circles. Some have a well-defined structure, as in the case of SEELS and a certain degree of influence, such as the case of WB6 CIF. On the other hand, they often suffer from the lack of a specific budget, depending on donors and members' fees.

In terms of incisiveness, the initiatives with a narrow scope or those with specific territorial application and a clear reference to the common purpose of EU membership are more likely to produce practical policy recommendations and to coordinate the national efforts at regional

level. This is the case of internally driven initiatives such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, the International Sava River Basin Commission or the EU Strategy for the Danube Region and the EUSAIR, which are focused on the management of a specific territory and during the years have generated several Protocols and Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) among their members.

Similarly, externally driven initiatives, focused on areas of mutual interest such as security – the Police Cooperation Convention for SEE and the Regional Platform for Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism – and transports – the Transport Community or Energy with the Energy Community are more capable of generating political outcomes and imprinting a political direction, rather than have a mere consultative role.

Among the most prolific cooperation example there is the SEECP, that established important initiatives such as the Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative **(RAI**) in 2000 and the Migration, Asylum, and Refugee Regional Initiative (**MARRI**) in 2004, as well as the RCC, promotor of numerous task forces and working groups.

The multitude of regional initiatives confirms a demand for cooperation, but some endeavours inevitably lose relevance with time and may further strain the already limited administrative capacities of the WB countries.

Many new initiatives, despite their intentions to generate a positive impact, often overlap and fail to strengthen ties between countries. Moreover, when interviewed for this research, Ana Krstinovska, founder and president of the North Macedonian think tank Estima, suggests that initiatives focused solely on the WB6 risk isolating these nations, eventually confining them to a "ghetto." The solution should be broader, involving EU member states from Southeast Europe to ensure engagement in resolving bilateral issues and advancing the integration process[10].

Chapter 2: Case Study – The Berlin Process

Erion Gjatolli, Serena Epis, OBCT

2.1 The berlin process over the years

In 2014, the then President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, announced that EU enlargement would be on hold until at least the end of his term in 2019, marking a notable acknowledgment of enlargement fatigue from a senior EU official and stirring dissatisfaction among the candidate countries. This was a period when the Union would grapple with numerous integration challenges, including the financial and migration crises and the Brexit

[10] Gentiola Madhi (2024), Western Balkans, EU integration and cooperation, OBCT https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Balkans/Western-Balkans-EU-integration-and-cooperation-232553.

referendum. The transition from the Directorate-General for Enlargement to the Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) further signalled the diminishing focus on enlargement prospects. In February 2018, the European Commission released its enlargement strategy for the WB6 with a timeline extending beyond 2025. While the document reaffirmed the region's "European path", it simultaneously stated that no enlargement would occur before 2025[11].

Against this background, the then German Chancellor Angela Merkel gathered in a high-level Summit in Berlin the top representatives from the six WB countries, along with representatives of other member states, including Austria, France, Croatia and Slovenia[12]. The purpose of the BP was to reaffirm the EU's dedication to enlargement in the region, by focusing on issues of regional and economic cooperation, and underscoring the importance of sustaining the momentum on reforms that would advance the process. It offered to foster economic growth, connectivity and regional cooperation, while introducing a novel platform where national leaders could convene as equals - despite their bilateral issues or state of advancement in the EU process - fostering dialogue and cooperation in resolving long-standing conflicts. The BP format has been exploring how the WB could gain short-term benefits before achieving EU membership by focusing on economic issues and regional cooperation, based on the notion that stronger economic ties can help stabilise the region [13] .

The Process's connectivity agenda referred to linking the people, economies and states of the region. Investments in economic projects were channelled through the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF), a donor coordination instrument that pools funds from the European Commission, the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), bilateral donors, and the governments of the WB.

Building on Merkel's leadership, the following summits took place in Paris (2016), Trieste (2017), London (2018), Poznan (2019), Sofia (2020), and once more in Berlin in 2021 and 2022, before temporarily losing focus, partly due to decreased engagement from Germany. With German Chancellor Olaf Scholz taking the lead and pledging to support once again the EU enlargement process as a key aspect of his government's foreign policy, two additional summits have since taken place, marking a second phase for the BP: the first, held once again in Germany in 2022, and the most recent in Tirana in 2023.

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[11] Vjosa Musliu (2021), The Berlin Process for the Western Balkans. What is in a name?, Journal of Cross-Regional Dialogues/La Revue de dialogues inter-régionaux , 2/2021 - Special issue Western Balkans, European Union and Emerging Powers, https://popups.uliege.be/2593-9483/index.php?id=172

[12] Other countries later joined the BP: Italy (2015), the UK (2017), Poland, Bulgaria and Greece (2018).

[13] Vulović, Marina (2022), The Berlin Process in the Western Balkans: Big ideas, difficult implementation, SWP Comment, No. 70/2022, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin, https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/268768/1/1828306444.pdf.

The BP relied heavily on the voluntary participation and commitment of the involved governments[14]. The very structure of the process allows the host countries to set the agenda, without a dedicated institution tasked with overseeing the strategic development of the entire initiative or monitoring its outcomes. As a result, these states often determined the focus areas influenced by their own national priorities or interests[15].

As the EU recognized regional cooperation as a key factor for economic development and prosperity, Germany's first summit's agenda had a three pillar structure: the *diplomatic* pillar, prioritising the resolution of bilateral issues; the *economic* pillar, focused on economic growth and the *soft* pillar, dedicated to civil society participation[16].

The second Summit, under Austria's leadership, further developed discussions on connectivity, incorporating elements of the rule of law and good governance, while introducing a new emphasis on youth engagement. Vienna also facilitated a dedicated Civil Society Forum (CSF) alongside the summit, aiming to enhance the inclusion of civil society and offer it a platform to contribute to the summit's endeavor. Additionally, Austria's initiative culminated in the adoption of a declaration addressing bilateral disputes and a joint declaration on the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)[17].

The 2016 summit led by France concentrated more on vocational training, unemployment and youth exchanges, formally establishing and funding RYCO and somewhat sidelining civil society involvement, bilateral disputes, and migration issues [18] .

The following year in Trieste, the Italian government continued the connectivity agenda and demonstrated a stronger interest in the development of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and innovation. The participants in the Trieste meeting also refocused on the rule of law and the fight against corruption. The resulting Anti-Corruption Workshop led to the signing of a Joint Declaration Against Corruption by the Italian and WB anti-corruption authorities[19].

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[14] Balkans Policy Research Group, The relaunch of the Berlin Process for the Western Balkans: making its objectives more ambitious, October 2022, https://balkansgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/The-Relaunch-of-the-Berlin-Process-for-the-Western-Balkans-Making-its-Objectives-more-Ambitious-2-1.pdf.

[15] Ibidem.

[16] Griessler, Christina. (2020). The Berlin Process. Bringing the Western Balkan Region Closer to the European Union. Südosteuropa. 68. 1-24, https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/soeu-2020-0001/html?lang=en.

[17] Nicić Jovan, Zoran Nechev, Selma Mameledžija (2016), The Berlin Process and Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans: how to make agreements more effective and efficient?, https://www.balkanfund.org/publib/thinkandlink/THE-BERLIN-PROCESS-AND-REGIONAL-COOPERATION-IN-THE-WESTERN-BALKANS-HOW-TO-MAKE-AGREEMENTS-MORE-EFFECTIVE-AND-EFFICIENT.pdf.

[18] Florent Marciacq (2017,), The EU and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process. Reflecting on the EU enlargement in times of uncertainty, Dialogue Southeast Europe, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung https://oefz.at/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/171206_Study_Marciacq_online.pdf.

[19] Trieste Western Balkan Summit. Joint Declaration Against Corruption (2017), Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

In 2018, the London Summit raised a few eyebrows, given the upcoming formal departure of the UK from the European Union. However, the event reaffirmed a strong emphasis on economic development and connectivity. Progress was achieved in the areas of security, border protection, and fostering good neighbourly relations, highlighted by the adoption of a Joint Declaration on Regional Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations, which is a key priority on the enlargement agenda[20].

The decision to hold the 2019 Summit in Poznań was also subject to debate, given Poland's historically limited interest in the WB. However, experts suggest that the meeting was thoroughly prepared, effectively took stock of the progress made up to that point, and resulted in a detailed and unusually extensive 11-page Chair's conclusions [21]. The summit predominantly focused on economic development and connectivity, with participants committing to support the private sector in enhancing entrepreneurial capacity and exploring opportunities for financial market diversification. Environmental issues were also addressed, as the respective ministers from the WB countries signed a joint Statement on Clean Energy Transition and initiated a "Green Agenda" to combat climate change[22].

The 2020 Sofia Summit endorsed several initiatives designed to enhance the region's economic potential. Notably, the leaders expressed strong support for the European Commission's Economic and Investment Plan for the WB. Building upon the Sofia Declaration and in the spirit of regional cooperation, the Summit introduced the Common Regional Market (CRM) initiative, a foundational document embodying a vision that aligns with regional economic interests and fosters enhanced economic cooperation, with the overarching goal of narrowing the gap to both EU markets and institutions[23].

The 2022 Berlin Summit took forward the CRM initiative, leading the six Balkan leaders to adopt agreements facilitating regional freedom of movement and employment. The Summit took place against the backdrop of the energy crisis, making energy security a key topic on the agenda. The European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a €1 billion

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https://www.esteri.it/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/approfondimenti/2017/07/trieste-western-balkan-summit-joint/.

[20] Joint Declaration on Regional Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations (2018), Western Balkans Summit https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/724294/180710_WBS_Joint_Declarations.pdf.

[21] Mary Drosopulos (2020), Berlin process: Overview of the progress by the six Western Balkans countries since London and Poznan' Summits, https://www.academia.edu/68435524/Berlin_process_Overview_of_the_progress_by_the_six_Western_Balkans_countries_since_London_and_Poznan_Summits?auto=download.

[22] Western Balkans Summit Poznań. Chair's conclusions (2019) https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/western-balkans-summit-poznan-chairs-conclusions.

[23] Ana Krstinovska, Ardian Hackaj (2020), Sofia Summit 2020. Takeaways and lessons learnt, Cooperation and Development Institute and Hanns Seidel Stiftung https://cdinstitute.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/SOFIA-SUMMIT-Takeaways-and-Lessons-Learnt.pdf.

subsidy package, with €500 million to offset energy prices and the remaining €500 million dedicated to energy diversification and renewable energy investments[24].

The meeting also set a favourable backdrop for the following Tirana Summit in 2023, providing an opportunity for EU institutions to reaffirm the significance of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, particularly amid geopolitical uncertainty and ongoing conflicts. The Chair's Conclusions emphasised the necessity of enhancing connectivity across various sectors - such as transport, trade, energy, and digital networks - to strengthen regional ties and align all countries more closely with EU standards. To this end, a new Growth Plan was unveiled in Tirana, featuring €2 billion in grants and €4 billion in loans, aimed at accelerating the implementation of essential reforms, positioning them as key drivers of progress in the Western Balkans.

The decision to host the Summit in Tirana can be viewed symbolically as a positive step, marking a departure from previous years when EU cities were the primary hosts[25]. A shift that reflects an increasing willingness to hold meetings within the region, signalling the process's intent to engage local stakeholders more cohesively.

2.2 A decade later: work still in progress

Ten years ago, the BP was presented as an effort to inject fresh momentum into the stalled enlargement process. Yet, Germany's initiative also sparked concerns that it might be intended as a replacement for the stagnant EU enlargement policy, rather than an opportunity to reinforce it. Critics argue that the absence of a concrete EU accession roadmap has led EU initiatives to prioritise cooperation while failing to advance the enlargement process. This approach resulted in a scenario where candidates would undertake superficial reforms, often without genuine commitment to fully meeting the EU's criteria. With the additional risk of leaving the WB countries stuck in the waiting room, particularly Montenegro, Albania, and Serbia, by perpetually delaying actual accession and undermining their aspirations[26].

Originally designed to last only four years, the process remains ongoing, with experts largely agreeing it continues to suffer from insufficient oversight and inadequate documentation on monitoring, reporting on the implementation and the outcomes. Indeed, beyond the numerous forums and commitments, the task of measuring and evaluating tangible outcomes has proven challenging.

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[24] CeSPI (2022), Conclusions of the 2022 Summit of the Berlin Process https://www.cespi.it/en/eventi-attualita/focus-balcani/news-conclusions-2022-summit-berlin-process.

[25] Sava Mirković (2024), Open Balkans: a failed step in the right direction, OBCT https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Balkans/Open-Balkan-a-failed-step-in-the-right-direction-232590.

[26] Tena Prelec (2017), Has the WB6 Process become a "surrogate for the real thing"?, LSE blog, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/07/14/has-the-western-balkans-6-process-become-a-surrogate-for-the-real-thing/.

Without rigorous follow-up assessments or a well-structured administrative framework, we lack a comprehensive understanding of the extent to which the commitments outlined in the final declarations have been fully or partially realized. For example, despite the strong emphasis on environmental awareness at the 2023 Tirana Summit, where leaders endorsed the Joint Declaration of Intent on the Regional Climate Partnership, highlighting the importance of a green transition and the role of private sector investments in energy efficiency, renewable energy, and sustainable development, there remains a lack of information regarding the implementation of these environmental commitments[27].

Ultimately, the primary strength of the BP lied in the involvement of the leading and most powerful EU member states in the WB integration process during a time when enlargement fatigue was prevalent. However, relying on the support of individual member states, rather than being grounded and receiving backing from EU institutions, was not sufficient to overcome the many bilateral issues or the political contention that emerged overtime.

Member states have shown a tendency to base decisions on domestic interests and electoral cycles, as evidenced by the frequent use of vetoes on enlargement matters. A notable instance is France's decision to block accession talks for Albania and North Macedonia, citing the necessity of reforming the accession process before any new members could be admitted to the EU. This only adds to the bilateral disputes that have also stalled the process for singular states. Between 2009 and 2019, Greece blocked North Macedonia's EU membership negotiations due to a long-standing name dispute, which was finally resolved with the signing of the Prespa Agreement. In 2020, North Macedonia faced another obstacle when Bulgaria halted its accession efforts over historical disagreements, with the compromise reached in 2022 still awaiting implementation by Skopje. Currently, Albania is facing the threat of a Greek veto due to a controversy involving an ethnic Greek mayor-elect, Fredi Beleri. In 2024, Beleri was endorsed by Greece's ruling New Democracy Party and elected as a member of the European Parliament, further heightening tensions. In the future, it is not far-fetched to foresee Croatia potentially using its veto in Serbia's or Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession talks over issues like the status of the Croatian community in Bosnia[28].

While accelerating legal and regulatory reforms in the Western Balkans, the Berlin Process has also strengthened regional cooperation on critical issues, including closing infrastructure gaps and tackling youth unemployment. The commitment to establish a Common Regional Market (CRM), modelled after the EU's single market, stands out as the most promising initiative, given its broad endorsement by the WB6 and its potential to unlock the region's economic growth, as discussed in chapter 3.

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[27] Joint Declaration of Intent between the Leaders of the Western Balkans Six and the Federal Republic of Germany on the Regional Climate Partnership (2023) https://www.berlinprocess.de/uploads/documents/joint-declaration-of-intent-regional-climate-partnership-bp-summit-2023_1697614107.pdf.

[28] Dimitar Bechev (2024), Can EU Enlargement Work?, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/06/can-eu-enlargement-work?lang=en.

Since its inception, along with successive summits and the inclusion of additional countries in the initiative, the Berlin Process has established a series of ambitious and far-reaching objectives. Despite its limitations, precisely through fostering regional connectivity and facilitating the Western Balkans' integration into the EU single market, the Berlin Process has played a significant role in advancing the WB6's path towards EU accession.

2.3 Civil society at the margins

Although the BP was initially born as an intergovernmental initiative, the countries that participated in the first Summit in Berlin in 2014[29] recognised in the meeting's conclusions that "*a politically active civil society would help strengthen the democratic community in the Western Balkans, thus bringing them closer to the EU*"[30].

The Civil Society Forum (CSF) was created for the second meeting of the BP at the Vienna Summit in 2015. Alongside the Business Forum and, later, the Youth Forum, the CSF represents the so-called "soft pillar" of the BP dedicated to civil society engagement and the promotion of educational projects and youth exchanges[31]. The goal was to promote civic participation in the policy processes, providing civil society organisations (CSOs) with a platform to exchange ideas, monitor the implementation of the summits' results, voice their concerns vis-à-vis European and Balkan decision-makers and advance policy recommendations.

The core of the CSF is represented by yearly side-events to official BP summits, where CSOs from all participating countries are invited to take part in discussions on key issues such as the rule of law, youth cooperation, environment, mobility, and business development.

From the very beginning, the summit chair's conclusions clearly mentioned the key role of civic actors, presenting them as "*independent, active, engaged and respected partners*"[32] whose participation could help "*build the participatory democracies that the WB are striving to become*"[33] and contribute to "*making the BP more relevant for the integration of the region and the perspective of the integration with the EU*"[34].

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[29] Alongside the governments of the six Western Balkans countries, representatives from France, Austria, Croatia and Slovenia joined Germany in the first edition of the Berlin Process.

[30] Chair's Final Declaration, Berlin 2014, https://www.berlinprocess.de/uploads/documents/chairs-final-declaration-2014_1714043796.pdf.

[31] Griessler, Christina. (2020). The Berlin Process. Bringing the Western Balkan Region Closer to the European Union. Südosteuropa. 68. 1-24, https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/soeu-2020-0001/html?lang=en.

[32] Declaration by the Italian Chair, Trieste 2017, https://www.berlinprocess.de/uploads/documents/declaration-by-the-italian-chair-2017_1714043754.pdf.

[33] Chair's Conclusion, Poznan 2019, https://www.berlinprocess.de/uploads/documents/chairs-conclusions-2019_1714043719.pdf.

[34] Ibidem.

To be sure, the BP has created a useful platform and new valuable opportunities for exchange and dialogue among CSOs in the region and in the EU participating countries, giving them the chance to have a role at a high-level political event[35]. OBCT's participation in the work of the preparatory meeting of the CSF in July 2024 in Skopje and the participant observation in the 2023 Tirana meetings allowed us to directly verify the considerable quality of the contribution of civil society actors in the WB.

Indeed, as argued by Marta Szpala, Senior fellow at the Centre for Eastern Studies, during the CORE webinar organised by OBCT and CeSPI in June 2024, civil society cooperation in the region overtime has become rich and productive: CSOs have often demonstrated to be able to effectively work across barriers to find common solutions to common challenges, build bridges across countries and foster mutual understanding among the population of the region[36].

Yet, such a technical empowerment has not always resulted in an increased political weight vis-à-vis decision-makers. Most governments in the region tend to look at CSOs with suspicion and distrust, regarding them as hostile to national interests rather than allies for the achievement of common goals. The cooperation with CSOs is thus perceived as an externally imposed obligation rather than a valuable opportunity to advance towards regional and European integration.

As explained by Szpala, the problem lies in the fact that BP two tracks - one path involving national governments and European institutions, and one involving European institutions and civil society - rarely meet and the three actors - national governments, European institutions and civil society - seem rather unable to speak to one another. The result is that, even as part of the BP, WB leaders are often reluctant to follow up on civil society recommendations and suggestions.

Moreover, as lamented by some CSOs during the Skopje preparatory meeting in 2024, to respond to the request of European institutions to involve civil society in the decision-making process, WB governments have systematically favored the growth of governmentally sponsored organisations known as GONGOs (Governmental Non-Governmental Organisations) that they can control with fake participatory mechanisms. A typical situation is one where the EU calls for a letter of endorsement by the local institutions to prove that there will be some kind of state-society cooperation and civil society's work can have a tangible impact. While independent civil society organisations fail to obtain such letters, GONGOs can obtain them easily.

[35] European Parliament (2016), The Western Balkans' Berlin Process: A new impulse for regional cooperation, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2016)586602.
[36] Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and gradual integration to the EU, June 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sVgfXmchys&t=1s.

Box 1 The 2023 Tirana Summit - Civic Society Forum

In 2023, the work of the CSF was organised around seven thematic working groups, each involving CSOs from the region discussing the following topics: common regional market and accession to the EU single market; climate and green agenda; digitalisation and connectivity; energy; mobility; politics of enlargement; security and geopolitics.

Each working group organised meetings and consultations with specialised organisations and experts from the region which resulted in some detailed recommendations with reference to specific EU norms and tools and concrete steps that could help the region's path towards European integration. These recommendations were ultimately presented at the leaders' summit that took place in Tirana in October 2023.

In the 2023 Chair's conclusions there is only a brief mention of the CSF as one the platforms and initiatives animating the BP. What is striking is that in the final declaration, when presenting the results of the discussions in the different policy areas, no reference is made to the contributions or recommendations advanced by the CSF.

This represents a step back compared to past declarations, when at least BP participants felt the need to reiterate their support to civil society inclusion and praise its role for the gradual integration of the region into the EU.

Regretfully, as reported by people who took part in the event, civil society representatives received a rather inadequate and superficial consideration[37]. OBCT's comparison between CSF's recommendations and Chair's conclusions (see Annex 2) shows that only few of civil society's concerns were somehow mentioned in the final declaration. If civil society suggestions on mobility and research and innovation development were partially welcomed or at least reflected in the text, they were rather disregarded when they addressed more sensitive issues such as the development of the regional common market, the energy market and the implementation of the green agenda, a sign that indicates yet again governments' reluctance to consider civic actors reliable allies for policy development.

Whether the BP and its CSF have been successful in opening up the integration process to inputs from civil society and enhancing the role of CSOs in front of European and Balkan policy-makers remains an open question. While cooperation is regarded as crucial in principle, it seems to be more and more challenging in practice. From this point of view, the BP remains an intergovernmental process, with civil society only marginally consulted.

To be sure, there is room for improvement as for the role of the CSF within the framework of the BP: a clearer political will from all participant countries to take its input into account is surely needed for the interfacing between civic and institutional actors to be functional, fruitful

[37] Marta Szpala, Senior fellow at the Centre for Eastern Studies, during the webinar "Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and gradual integration to the EU", June 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sVgfXmchys&t=1s.

and effective. A stronger involvement of civil society could also be foreseen to monitor the follow up of each event, something that in turn would enhance the effectiveness of the BP itself. Otherwise, as we have previously argued, the risk is that the CSF will remain a sentinel without real tools for political dialogue, especially at the WB regional level[38].

2.4 Berlin process and Open Balkans: alternative or complementary?

As briefly mentioned in chapter 2, while the BP temporarily stalled revealing the limitations in realising the full benefits of regional cooperation, the Open Balkan Initiative (OBI) emerged in 2021. Led by Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia, it built on a previous, partial regional effort known as "Mini-Schengen". The OBIsought to facilitate the free movement of capital, goods, services, and labour, somehow overlapping with the Berlin Process, particularly regarding trade-related initiatives. The OBIworked in particular on measures such as allowing citizens to work freely across the three participating countries and establishing expedited customs "green lanes" for the transportation of goods.

The OBI was not joined by Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as the stalling Common Regional Market that convinced Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania to move forward independently, overcoming in particular Kosovo's refusal to sign agreements that wouldn't have signalled any progress in the mutual recognition process with Serbia[39].

Experts are divided on whether the OBI represented a risky alternative to the EU-led BP or a positive example of productive cooperation among WB countries. On one hand, the initiative could affect both the symbolic and practical dimensions of regional cooperation, potentially undermining the goals of the Common Regional Market (CRM) promoted by the Berlin Process. By allowing the countries involved to advance more swiftly in economic cooperation by circumnavigating bilateral disputes that obstruct regional decision-making, the initiative could exacerbate regional divisions between its members - Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania — and non-participating states - Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina[40].

Additionally, the OBI risks increasing economic disparities, as Serbia's significantly larger and more advanced economy is likely to attract more foreign investment and produce higher-value goods, potentially widening the economic gap within the region[41].

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[38] OBCT and CeSPI. 2021. L'allargamento europeo ai Balcani occidentali: il ruolo della società civile per rilanciare la prospettiva europea della regione, https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/Occasional-papers/L-allargamento-europeo-ai-Balcani-occidentali-il-ruolo-della-societa-civile-per-rilanciare-la-prospettiva-europea-della-regione.

[39] Damir Marusic, Maja Piscevic, and Jörn Fleck (2022), Germany steps up in the Western Balkans. Will the EU follow its lead?, Atlantic Council https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/germany-steps-up-in-the-western-balkans-will-the-eu-follow-its-lead/.

[40] CeSPI (2022), L'Iniziativa Open Balkans potrebbe avere ripercussioni negative per i Balcani Occidentali https://www.cespi.it/it/eventi-attualita/focus-balcani/liniziativa-open-balkans-potrebbe-avere-ripercussioni-negative-i.

[41] Edward P. Joseph (2022), Open Balkan(s) is Not Just Unwise. It's Dangerous, Balkan Insight https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/15/open-balkans-is-not-just-unwise-its-dangerous/.

Viewed from a different angle, the OBI can be seen as a complementary effort to the BP. Symbolically, it holds significant value as a self-driven regional initiative, embodying the principle of local ownership. On a practical level, while enhancing regional cooperation among WB states is essential, their active participation in EU decision-making processes - such as joint gas procurement, migration management, the implementation of the green agenda, and cybersecurity - remains equally important[42].

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has refrained from endorsing the OBI, emphasising instead the significance of the BP, which involves all WB6. The European Parliament similarly expressed strong reservations about regional initiatives that exclude any of these countries or do not align with EU standards. A critical stance indicating that increased EU support for the OBI is unlikely due to concerns over its compliance with EU norms and the divisions it risks creating within the region.

Finally, with the launching of the Growth Plan, the enthusiasm around the OBI further diminished, whilst Albania announced that the initiative was born out of the need to push forward the Berlin Process and had "fulfilled its mission".

Chapter 3: Towards A Common Regional Market And Gradual Integration To The Eu

Luisa Chiodi, Serena Epis, OBCT

For years, the effort to stimulate economic cooperation at regional level as a fundamental step to stabilise the region in the WB has been sustained by several initiatives, starting from the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), down to the Berlin Process (BP).

As described by the CSF (Civic Society Forum) in Tirana in 2023 "*The Berlin Process has significantly influenced the EU enlargement agenda, focusing on common regional market development and the energy transition. (...) What the Berlin Process has introduced into this equation is a significant injection of political will. By shifting attention away from bilateral issues, the process has fostered regional cooperation*"[43].

The most ambitious initiative established within the economic cooperation framework of the BP is the Common Regional Market (CRM), introduced at the 2020 Sofia Summit. Building on the previous plan for the Regional Economic Area (REA), outlined at the Trieste Summit in 2017, and based on the EU *four freedoms*, the CRM aims to ensure the free movement of

[42] Margit Wunsch Gaarmann (2022), The "Open Balkan" Initiative Complements the Berlin Process, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/the-open-balkan-initiative-complements-the-berlin-process.

[43] The Road to CSF Tirana 2023. Unlocking Progress, The European Future of the Western Balkans, Open Society Foundations – Western Balkans (OSFWB) Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) Cooperation and Development Institute (CDI) https://www.berlinprocess.de/uploads/documents/the-road-to-csf-tirana-2023_1722845519.pdf.

goods, services, capital, and people, including aspects relating to digital, investment, innovation, and industry policy. Designed to unlock the region's economic potential and enhance WB's attractiveness to European investors, the CRM aims to prepare and support WB countries in aligning to the EU acquis, build mutual trust and incentivise local ownership in the field of the four freedoms.

As part of the CRM initiative, all WB6 leaders signed four mobility agreements, including on the recognition of higher education and professional qualifications and the freedom of movement with identity cards. However, similar to other ambitious achievements of the BP, their implementation by the WB6 has frequently stagnated. Indeed, as of September 2024, only Montenegro, Kosovo and Albania have ratified all four agreements, while other countries in the region remain entangled in protracted disputes and entrenched political positions among their leaders[44].

Lately, the think tank community put forward a number of proposals focused on the graduality of the EU integration process, suggesting in particular *staged* or sectoral integration. Essentially, this approach aims to achieve two goals at once: combining the CRM with the gradual integration into the EU Single Market as a unified effort. The idea is that gradual access to the EU Single Market can serve as a stronger incentive for stabilising the region, while the direct connection to EU integration could encourage more effective regional cooperation among the WB6[45].

The experience of the Visegrad countries serves as a positive example: while regional cooperation in Central Europe struggled despite EU incentives, it began to grow after their accession, also contributing to building a stronger regional identity[46].

This approach to regional cooperation and EU integration is not new, as analyst Adnan Ćerimagić noted in our interview. When the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) was signed in 2006, the WB negotiated also the trade agreement with the EU, that is to say the Stabilisation and Association Agrements (SAA): *"But as the credibility of the EU accession process started to fade away, issues have emerged in regional cooperation as well"*[47].

The CEFTA was signed as a temporary mechanism to facilitate EU accession, yet its decision-making mechanism based on unanimity prevented it from producing concrete results, as the process was often blocked by vetoes linked to unresolved political disputes. As underlined by a study of the Regional Centre for Strategic and Political Initiative (RCSPI): "*Unwittingly, the*

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[44] CRM update from Serbia, Cooperation & Development Institute, https://cdinstitute.eu/2024/09/06/crm-update-serbia/.

[45] The Road to CSF Tirana 2023. Unlocking Progress, The European Future of the Western Balkans, Open Society Foundations – Western Balkans (OSFWB) Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) Cooperation and Development Institute (CDI) https://www.berlinprocess.de/uploads/documents/the-road-to-csf-tirana-2023_1722845519.pdf.

[46] Ibidem, p.60.

[47] Gentiola Madhi (2024), Ćerimagić: Regional cooperation to be linked to EU membership, OBCT https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Bosnia-Herzegovina/Cerimagic-Regional-cooperation-to-be-linked-to-EU-membership-230327.

temporary mechanism has become permanent in practice. The CEFTA institutional framework has remained strictly intergovernmental rather than creating regional bodies with some competence to issue proposals, undertake independent surveillance of implementation and possess some enforcement powers"[48].

In addition, as stressed by Nenad Đurđević - advisor to the President of the Serbian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Head of RCSPI - in an interview with OBCT, beyond the problems deriving from the tense political relations, WB regional economic integration faces obstacles such as market fragmentation and lack of coordination in adopting and implementing the EU acquis for trade and economic policies. Most WB countries suffer from *'underdeveloped infrastructure and not satisfactory level of domestic investment compounded with the lack of skilled workforce and depopulation trends*"[49].

A few proposals emerged in the think tank community on how to overcome the deadlock of CEFTA that is currently stuck due to the request to replace UNMIK with full participation of Kosovo. Among others, RCSPI, embracing the idea of gradual integration, suggests to avoid duplicating efforts prioritising the alignment with EU regulations over the regional market: "*when a country aligns with the EU regulations in a specific area and receives EU validation for successful implementation, it gets automatic recognition of its alignment also in all the Western Balkans without a necessity to receive additional recognition through regional process. In this way, a sector that achieved such a level of alignment with EU regulations will automatically benefit both from the CRM and EU Single Market access. This approach would break the current deadlock and enable countries in the region to progress based on their own efforts and merit*"[50].

As stressed during the CSF in Tirana, the European Commission has been receptive to the gradual integration approach: the new Growth Plan for the WB announced in November of last year foresees a parallel process of deepening the regional economic integration while working on the gradual association with the EU Single Market[51]. The Growth Plan, as mentioned above, increases the availability of funds, complementing the resources of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA)[52]. However, its disbursement will be linked to the proper implementation of the reform programmes aimed at enhancing the region's socio-economic

[48] Kamala Dawar, Peter Dodd, Dušan Janjić, Igor Novaković, Ivana Petrovska and Nenad Djurdjević (2024), A proposal for a new approach to the Western Blakans-EU relationship https://en-api.pks.rs/storage/assets/A%20New%20Approach%20to%20the%20Western%20Balkans%20integration_STUDY.pdf.

[49] Gentiola Madhi (2024), Balkans: Still many obstacles to regional economic cooperation, OBCT, https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Balkans/Balkans-Still-many-obstacles-to-regional-economic-cooperation-231090.

[50] Ibidem.

[51] Ristovski et al "Thematic Working Group on Access to European Single Market", in The Road to CSF Tirana 2023. Unlocking Progress, The European Future of the Western Balkans, Open Society Foundations – Western Balkans (OSFWB) Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) Cooperation and Development Institute (CDI) https://www.berlinprocess.de/uploads/documents/the-road-to-csf-tirana-2023_1722845519.pdf.

[52] Gentiola Madhi (2024), Balkans in the EU, towards a gradual integration?, OBCT, https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Balkans/Balkans-in-the-EU-towards-a-gradual-integration-229617.

convergence with EU members and at devising the solution to the political conflicts still hampering the stabilisation of the region.

On one hand, it is crucial to establish a clear connection between comprehensive reforms in good governance, the rule of law, and a professional public administration, and the possibility of early access to parts of the EU single market and its benefits. This is essential for building mutual trust between member states and candidate countries, and ensuring the proper functioning of the single market. On the other hand, regional leaders may view these requirements as too burdensome and politically costly compared to the potential future benefits of market integration.

Doubts about the real impact of the Growth Plan have already started to emerge. The Austrian think-tank WIIW put it bluntly: "*The EU Commission's new economic plan for the Western Balkans may sound promising, but it falters upon closer inspection. It lacks substance, fails to address key issues, and doesn't fix past flaws*"[53]. In particular, some experts warn that the resources made available by the Growth Plan are too limited both to respond to the needs of the region and to convince local leaders to overcome the intractable conflicts they built their political careers on. As Ćerimagić noted: "*The question is whether the Balkan politicians will see it as a game changer. At the moment we get mixed signals, from huge praise to more disappointed tones. I fear the latter will be proven right*"[54].

In Tirana, the CSF showed great expectations on the potential of the Plan and the final document stressed how "*the European Commission should present a plan with a feasible timeline to allow the markets of the WB6 to immediately access the EU Single Market in all areas that would not impose high adjustment costs and would be highly beneficial and visible for businesses and citizens*"[55].

Experts caution that early access to the EU single market will bring challenges for candidate countries, as they will face significant and potentially disruptive adjustment costs[56]. Setting up the legal, administrative, and technical foundations needed for a functioning market economy, capable of handling competitive pressure at the European level, may be especially demanding

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[53] Branimir Jovanović (2024), The EU's new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans: solid foundations but shaky details, WIIW, https://wiiw.ac.at/the-eu-s-new-growth-plan-for-the-western-balkans-solid-foundations-but-shaky-details-n-622.html.

[54] Gentiola Madhi (2024), Ćerimagić: Regional cooperation to be linked to EU membership, OBCT https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Bosnia-Herzegovina/Cerimagic-Regional-cooperation-to-be-linked-to-EU-membership-230327.

[55] The Road to CSF Tirana 2023. Unlocking Progress, The European Future of the Western Balkans, Open Society Foundations – Western Balkans (OSFWB) Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) Cooperation and Development Institute (CDI) https://www.berlinprocess.de/uploads/documents/the-road-to-csf-tirana-2023_1722845519.pdf.

[56] Enrico Letta (2024), Much more than a market. SPEED, SECURITY, SOLIDARITY Empowering the Single Market to deliver a sustainable future and prosperity for all EU Citizens,https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf.

for these countries[57]. As some sectors and some countries may be more exposed to such burdens, in the think tank community the gradual integration in the Single market is seen as a positive move as it foresees measures to harness the consequences for those economic sectors that inevitably will be on the loser's side[58].

Among the strategies to balance the relative losses that will derive from the gradual integration in the Single market, a few think tanks advocate for the early accession to the cohesion policy before the EU integration[59]. In the next few months, the negotiation for the next Multiannual Financial Framwork (2028-2034) will see an intense effort to achieve the goal of convincing member states of the strategic interests of secure sufficient resources to support candidate countries in their efforts to prepare for the future accession applying the financial mechanism in place for member states[60].

[57] Peter Becker and Barbara Lippert (2024), Acceding Countries' Gradual Integration into the EU Single Market Prerequisites, Opportunities and Hurdles, SWP https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2024C42_Gradual_Integration.pdf .

[58] Jorge Nunez Ferrer, Marcel Tobias Schreiber, Guillaume Moreno (2024), Furthering cohesion in an enlarged Europe Impacts of enlargement on regional Cohesion Policy allocations, CPMR, https://cpmr.org/wpdm-package/cpmr-study-impacts-of-enlargement-on-cohesion-policy-and-the-eu-regions-april-2024/?wpdmdl=37681&ind=1712648197999.

[59] Among the most vocal the Albanian Cooperation and Development Institute https://cdinstitute.eu/2024/05/22/unlocking-cohesion-policy-toolbox-see6-2/.

[60] See among other things, the OBCT webinar on the topic: Cohesion reform and enlargement policy, September 2024, https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/Media/Multimedia/Cohesion-reform-and-Enlargement-policy.

Box 2 Conflicting interests: the case of environmental protection

In addition to well-known political conflicts hampering the WB accession process, in the last few weeks new issues have emerged in the field of environmental protection. The BP 2023 Chairs' conclusions referred to the WB contribution to the EU supply of such Critical Raw Materials (CRM), suggesting that the availability in the region of CRM can "*not only enhance the EU's security of supply but also promote economic growth and job creation in the Western Balkans*". The document also mentioned "*the importance of adopting a sustainable and inclusive approach in harnessing the potential of the Western Balkans in the common raw materials and EU Value Chain that takes into account environmental and social considerations*"[61].

In summer 2024, however, large public protests sparked once again in Serbia condemning the exploitation of local natural resources by foreign firms and governments and denouncing the environmental risks linked to CRM extraction. In August 2024, marches were organised to protest against the mining project in the Jadar valley for the extraction of lithium, a crucial raw material that would significantly support the production of electric vehicles in the EU. Environmental activities denounced the environmental destruction that such a project would cause, irreversibly compromising the ecosystem of the valley. A large part of the population also expressed strong concerns that the Western electric vehicle industry may be already competing to exploit natural resources, which would not result in meaningful benefits for the country itself.

On July 19, the European Commission, in the presence of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Serbian government on sustainable raw materials, battery value chains and electric vehicles[62]. The partnership presented as a building block in advancing Serbia's integration in the EU single market was not positively welcomed by a substantial part of Serbian public opinion, which increasingly views this project as exploitative and detrimental to the national interest.

As stressed by Matteo Colangeli, Regional Director for the WB at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), it is of paramount importance that the exploitation of the critical raw material in the region is developed with the best environmental and social protection[63].

If gradual integration into the EU single market is to be a driver of EU accession, it cannot come at the expense of the environmental sustainability of countries in the region. The participation in specific sectors of the EU single market should be perceived as advantageous and beneficial not only by governments, but also by citizens in the region. Attempts at gradual integration that fail to adequately take local concerns and interests into consideration, as in the case of the CRM, risk compromising the EU's credibility in the region and the accession agenda as whole, rather than promoting it.

CONCLUSION

Regarded as an essential factor for economic development, political stability, and security, regional cooperation has always been one of the key conditions for WB countries to access the EU. Over the years, EU conditionality has led to a proliferation of initiatives aimed at promoting cooperation among candidate countries from the WB region. These initiatives covered multiple thematic areas of common interests, from security to mobility, education, and youth engagement. Economic cooperation has always been at the forefront of the EU's efforts: the basic assumption being that stronger economic ties among WB countries would help stabilise the region, bringing it forward in its path to EU integration. Initiatives such as the CEFTA and the OBI were introduced to this very aim.

The analysis of over 60 regional initiatives showed that the proliferation of cooperation frameworks is rather a sign of their lack of incisiveness. Moreover, their multiplication leads to overlapping that overburdens the WB's public administrations with activities that fail to generate substantial results.

The ownership of the processes is a factor that needs to be taken into due consideration in assessing the effectiveness of regional initiatives. While European conditionality is a key element in promoting change and supporting domestic reforms in candidate countries, the external drive alone has hardly proven effective in producing concrete results in terms of enhanced regional cooperation.

Moreover, being overly reliant on EU or MS support makes externally driven initiatives particularly vulnerable to political changes at EU level. As witnessed on different occasions, member states' national interests and bilateral disputes can indeed block the integration process of countries in the region.

On the other hand, the current situation in the region remains deeply concerning. The ongoing setbacks in various aspects of democratic governance in WB countries and the deterioration of the main bilateral conflicts in the region represent a fundamental obstacle to the EU integration process. The last thing that the EU is willing to accept is indeed new member states not complying with rule of law standards and bringing new reasons for conflicts and divisions within the Union.

Often regarded as one of the most successful initiatives, the Berlin Process, since its inception, has positioned economic growth as essential to political stability and has focused on the

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[61] Chair's Conclusion, Tirana 2023, https://www.berlinprocess.de/uploads/documents/chairs-conclusions-2023_1714043445.pdf.

[62] European Commission (2024), EU and Serbia sign strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials, battery value chains and electric vehicles https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_3922.

[63] Matteo Colangeli, Regional Head of Western Balkans, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) during the conference "Preparing for Enlargement: Contributions of the EU and the Western Balkans", May 2024, at the minute 2.07.10, https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/Appuntamenti/Preparing-for-Enlargement-The-EU-and-Western-Balkans-contributions.

promotion of a common regional market as a strategy to overcome bilateral issues at the regional level.

Undoubtedly, the BP has had the merit to sustain and renew the attention to WB integration, ensuring that key member states remain engaged with the region and continue to collaborate for the common aim of full EU membership. The fact that the process, which was supposed to last four years, celebrates its 10th anniversary this year is somehow a sign of political commitment by the participating MSs and their Balkan counterparts.

However, despite the huge political capital standing behind it, the results of the BP have somehow been rather limited compared to its ambitions. In terms of economic cooperation, the most important initiative promoted by the BP is the establishment of the Common Region Market. Even in this case, the achievements have run aground in the face of implementation problems linked to protracted political disputes.

Nonetheless, the BP has provided a space for advancing new approaches at political level and for transnational civil society to expand the conversations around the proposals on the table to exit the current stalemate. The recent idea to make the regional economic integration and the gradual accession to the EU single market as two processes capable of alimenting each other being a case in point. This development could provide a stronger incentive for leaders of the region, potentially encouraging them to set aside controversial political positions hampering regional cooperation in light of greater benefits.

At this stage, the new Growth Plan welcomes the gradual integration approach, while also introducing stringent conditionality by tying disbursement to the achievement of key reforms. This approach is designed to incentivise WB authorities to undertake the difficult and often politically inconvenient reforms necessary to align with the EU, while rewarding their efforts with fresh financial resources. In this context, the BP can indeed function as a tool for gradual integration, particularly in advancing the region's integration into the European single market.

As new negative externalities will emerge even in this case for WB markets, it will be important to see if the advocacy efforts to include the WB countries in the cohesion policy before accession will succeed, thus helping them limit them.

In conclusion, it is clear that the EU should continue advancing integration with the WB tying financial assistance to concrete commitments and tangible outcomes from respective governments, as outlined in the Growth Plan initiative.

In addition to conditionality, a broader engagement of civil society is recommended to ensure initiatives have meaningful impact and to reinvigorate the EU enlargement process. Within the framework of the BP, civil society has already assumed a monitoring and accountability role, given its substantial expertise across various sectors, key reforms, and chapters of EU accession negotiations.

Fostering and expanding the involvement of democratic forces in the region can encourage and strengthen bottom-up initiative in candidate states, reinforce checks and balances on national

governments, improve transparency in reforms, and uphold the principles of the rule of law and democracy.

Sintesi e Raccomandazioni

Per l'Unione Europea (UE) la cooperazione regionale è un fattore cruciale per lo sviluppo economico, la stabilità politica e la sicurezza dei Balcani Occidentali, nonché una condizione essenziale per la futura integrazione europea della regione. Se negli ultimi due decenni il processo di allargamento dell'UE ha subito un rallentamento, lo stesso non si può dire per le iniziative di cooperazione regionale. Nel tempo si è infatti assistito ad una proliferazione di progetti volti ad incentivare la cooperazione tra i paesi balcanici in vari settori, tra cui riconciliazione, mobilità, sicurezza, energia, istruzione e coinvolgimento dei giovani nelle politiche pubbliche. Inizialmente guidati da incentivi esterni provenienti soprattutto dall'UE e dai suoi paesi membri, i paesi balcanici hanno assunto sempre più un ruolo di leadership nella promozione di progetti e iniziative di cooperazione.

Questo studio, finanziato dal Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale italiano e realizzato in collaborazione tra OBCT e CeSPI, ha preso in esame i risultati dei principali meccanismi e iniziative regionali in termini di rafforzamento della cooperazione regionale nei Balcani Occidentali e di prospettive di una graduale integrazione di questi Paesi nell'UE. Il progetto di ricerca ha previsto diverse attività (analisi della letteratura sul tema, elaborazione dati e interviste, un webinar pubblico) volte a migliorare la conoscenza sul tema.

La mappatura di oltre 60 progetti di cooperazione regionale, molte delle quali tuttora attive, ha dimostrato che la moltiplicazione di progetti ha spesso portato ad una sovrapposizione di obiettivi e ad un sovraccarico delle amministrazioni locali, senza necessariamente contribuire a risultati sostanziali. Da un lato, un eccessivo affidamento sul sostegno esterno rende i progetti di cooperazione regionale particolarmente vulnerabili a dinamiche politiche interne all'UE che possono finire per ostacolare l'avanzamento del processo di integrazione. Dall'altro lato, diverse iniziative "autoctone" si sono arenate a causa di irrisolte dispute bilaterali e persistenti tensioni regionali che ostacolano non solo la cooperazione regionale, ma anche il più ampio processo di integrazione europea. Difficilmente l'UE si mostrerà disposta ad accettare l'adesione di nuovi paesi che non rispettano lo stato di diritto e che rischiano di portare motivi di conflitto.

Tra le varie iniziative di cooperazione, una delle esperienze più durature è quella del Processo di Berlino, lanciato nel 2014 su spinta tedesca. Basato sull'assunto che lo sviluppo economico sia un elemento fondamentale per la stabilità politica, il Processo di Berlino ha fin da subito goduto di un significativo supporto politico da parte di diversi paesi UE e dei candidati balcanici: il fatto che quest'anno si celebri il decimo anniversario del Processo, inizialmente pensato per durare pochi anni, è se non altro un segno dell'impegno politico dei 10 paesi membri dell'UE coinvolti e delle controparti balcaniche.

Tuttavia, i risultati del Processo di Berlino sono stati piuttosto limitati rispetto alle ambizioni iniziali e al sostanziale capitale politico investito. In termini di cooperazione economica, l'iniziativa più coraggiosa è stata la promozione di un Mercato Regionale Comune che ha portato all'adozione di alcuni accordi ambiziosi, tra cui un accordo per il riconoscimento dei certificati di educazione superiore e delle qualifiche professionali e un accordo per la libertà di

movimento all'interno della regione con la sola carta d'identità. Anche in questo però, tali accordi si sono arenati a causa di problemi di attuazione legati a questioni politiche tra i leader regionali.

Gli sforzi intrapresi attraverso il Processo di Berlino hanno tuttavia dato uno stimolo allo sviluppo di approcci alternativi, come la più recente proposta di far procedente l'integrazione economica regionale in parallelo con la graduale adesione al mercato unico europeo. Secondo alcuni esperti consultati per questo studio, questo tipo di accesso progressivo potrebbe rappresentare un più forte incentivo alla cooperazione per i leader balcanici, i quali sarebbero incoraggiati ad abbandonare posizioni politiche controverse alla luce dei maggiori benefici derivanti dalla partecipazione ad alcuni meccanismi del mercato unico europeo.

Il nuovo Piano di Crescita per i Balcani Occidentali da 6 miliardi di euro adottato quest'anno dal Consiglio Europeo, accoglie l'idea dell'integrazione graduale dei paesi candidati al mercato unico europeo, introducendo allo stesso tempo una rigorosa condizionalità che lega i pagamenti ai paesi candidati al raggiungimento di alcune riforme in settori chiave, quali lo stato di diritto e il rafforzamento delle istituzioni democratiche. Tale approccio è pensato per offrire ai leader regionali un ulteriore incentivo per accelerare le riforme interne necessarie per allinearsi all'*acquis* comunitario, garantendo allo stesso tempo che i fondi UE vengano allocati ai paesi realmente impegnati a perseguire gli obiettivi di adesione.

Alla luce di queste considerazioni, OBCT e CeSPI hanno elaborato le seguenti **raccomandazioni.**

- Come evidenziato da questo studio, il numero di organizzazioni e iniziative regionali è in costante aumento. Parallelamente alla nascita di nuove idee e prospettive di collaborazione, emergono o persistono iniziative che hanno ormai perso il loro significato originario o che finiscono per duplicare sforzi già avviati. Nella fase di progettazione, ideazione o promozione di nuove iniziative di cooperazione regionale da parte dell'UE e/o degli Stati membri è importante **prevedere una ricognizione e valutazione circa presenti o passate iniziative similari che possono evidenziare elementi di successo o insuccesso** (in termini di lezioni apprese). La mappatura realizzata per questo studio ha evidenziato frequentemente l'assenza di informazioni circa i risultati ottenuti da molte iniziative o circa quei fattori che ne hanno determinato la fine (suggerendo quindi l'opportunità di maggiore ricerca e approfondimento). Le esperienze del passato possono essere molto utili se lette in relazione ai bisogni e alle sfide del presente, al fine di evitare duplicazioni o fallimenti prevedibili. Prima di avviare nuove piattaforme risulta quindi auspicabile valutare la possibilità di rafforzare o rivitalizzare esperienze esistenti o dormienti.

- Analogamente, nel caso in cui attori della regione o dell'UE si facessero promotori di nuove iniziative è importante verificare attentamente che non si tratti di mere ragioni di visibilità politica, che producono sforzi onerosi quanto limitati, che andrebbero dunque scoraggiati per non soffocare le amministrazioni locali di attività senza speranza di successo.

- Ad oggi, gli attori nazionali dei Balcani Occidentali hanno dimostrato un qualche interesse per la cooperazione regionale, pur non riuscendo a superare i conflitti regionali ereditati dalle guerre degli anni '90. E' certamente **importante consolidare quelle iniziative esistenti**, tra cui il Processo di Berlino, **che favoriscono** l'armonizzazione graduale alle normative europee.

- Lo sforzo di spingere contemporaneamente l'integrazione economica regionale e l'ingresso progressivo nel mercato unico europeo è potenzialmente significativo e tuttavia non mancheranno esternalità negative per alcuni settori economici della regione. Per questo favorire l'integrazione dei Balcani Occidentali nella politica di coesione prima della piena integrazione europea può essere importante per mitigare gli effetti negativi derivanti dalla debolezza economica di partenza.

- Le iniziative di cooperazione regionale dovrebbero coinvolgere tutti i paesi dei Balcani occidentali per garantire partecipazione, rappresentanza e "ownership" delle decisioni - nella regione come di fronte all'UE/Stati membri. In questo contesto, si raccomanda di sostenere progetti che godono del consenso di tutti i governi, evitando duplicazioni di iniziative già esistenti e iniziative che non pongono come priorità il rispetto degli standard europei, come nel caso dell'Open Balkans.

- Promuovere e ampliare il coinvolgimento delle forze democratiche e in generale del più ampio numero di portatori di interesse (attori economici e territoriali) dei WB può incoraggiare e rafforzare il processo di adesione dei paesi candidati, migliorare la trasparenza nelle riforme e sostenere i principi dello Stato di diritto. **Si raccomanda quindi un rafforzamento e coinvolgimento più ampio dei portatori di interesse per garantire che le iniziative abbiano un impatto significativo, tramite un processo di adesione dal basso, rivitalizzando il processo di allargamento dell'UE.** Da questo punto di vista, l'apertura della politica di coesione ai paesi candidati potrebbe favorire un approccio più territoriale ai processi decisionali in grado di offrire ai portatori di interesse un ruolo molto più importante nella definizione delle strategie economiche e nella loro attuazione.
  Inoltre, iniziative che si indirizzano ad attori della società civile dovrebbero ricevere adeguate risorse e riconoscimento per poter meglio rafforzare il proprio ruolo nei processi di democratizzazione e tutela dei diritti rispetto al *decision making* politico. Nell'ambito del PB, il Forum della società Civile del PB dovrebbe ricevere un maggiore ascolto e un più forte peso.
- La partecipazione di diversi Stati membri, con le proprie priorità ed interessi nazionali, ha ampliato lo scopo e il raggio d'azione del Processo di Berlino, mettendo in luce la **necessità di coordinamento a livello europeo concentrandosi su tematiche prioritarie in grado di generare risultati più tangibili.** L'UE/Stati membri sono chiamati a dare continuità alle iniziative che possono far avanzare il processo di (graduale) integrazione.

ANNEXES

1 - Mapping of initiatives, CeSPI

Acronym	Name	Establishment date	Headquarter
CEI	Central European Initiative	1989	Trieste, Italy
BSEC	Black Sea Economic Cooperation	1992	Istanbul, Turkey
PABSEC	Parliamentary Assembly of Black Sea Economic Cooperation	1993	Istanbul, Turkey
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement	1994	Brussels, Belgium
NISPACEE	Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe	1994	Bratislava Slovakia.
ABC	Association of Balkan Chambers	1994	N
SEECP	South East Europe Cooperation Process	1996	Sarajevo, Sofia
SECI	SEE Cooperation Initiative	1996	Vienna, Austria
SEDM	SEE Defense Ministerial Process	1996	N
EADRCC	Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre	1998	Brussels, Belgium
SELEC	Southeast European Law Enforcement Center	1999	Bucharest, Romania
RAI	Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative	2000	Sarajevo, BiH
AII	Adriatic Ionian Initiative	2000	Ancona, Italy
RACVIAC	Centre for Security Cooperation	2000	Bestovje, Croatia
DPPI SEE	Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for SEE	2000	Sarajevo, BiH
e-SEE	Electronic SEE Initiative	2001	Istanbul, Turkey
NALAS	Network of Associations of Local Authorities of SEE	2001	Skopje, North Macedonia
SEEHN	SEE Health Network	2001	Skopje, North Macedonia

SEESAC	The South Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons	2002	Belgrade, Serbia
SEPCA	Southeast Europe Police Chiefs Association	2002	Sofia, Bulgaria
SEEPAG	Southeast Europe Prosecutors Advisory Group	2003	Bucharest, Romania
A5	Adriatic Charter	2003	N
SEETO	SEE Transport Observatory	2004	
MARRI	Migration, Asylum, Refugee Regional Initiative	2004	Skopje, North Macedonia
CPF	Cetinje Parliamentary Forum	2004	
SWG RDD	Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group	2005	Skopje, North Macedonia
ECSEE	Energy Community for South East Europe	2006	Vienna, Austria
ISRBC	International Sava River Basin Commission	2006	Zagreb, Croatia
CPESSEC	Centre of Public Employment Services	2006	Contact person in each MS
PCC-SEE	Police Cooperation Convention for SEE	2007	Ljubljana, Slovenia
SEEIC	SEE Investment Committee	2007	Sarajevo, BiH
TFBHC	Task Force Fostering and Building Human Capital	2008	
WPON	Women Police Officer Network	2008	
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council	2008	Sarajevo, BiH
SEECEL	SEE Centre for Entrepreneurial Learning	2009	Zagreb, Croatia
WBIF	WB Investment Framework	2009	Brussels, Belgium
SEEMIC	SEE Military Intelligence Chiefs Forum	2009	N
ReSPA	Regional School of Public Administration	2010	Podgorica, Montenegro
ERI SEE	Education Reform Initiative of SEE	2010	Belgrade, Serbia
EUSDR	EU Strategy for the Danube Region	2010	Vienna, Bucharest
SELEC	SEE Law Enforcement Centre	2011	Bucharest, Romania
RHP	Regional Housing Programme	2011	
SEELS	SEE Law School Network	2011	Skopje, North Macedonia.
SEENSA	SEE National Security Authorities Forum	2011	

TFCS RCC	RCC Task Force on Culture and Society	2011	Cetinje, Montenegro
WBPET	WB Platform on Education and Training	2012	
WB-EDIF	WB Enterprise Development and Innovation Facility	2012	
BP	Berlin Process	2014	
SEECP PA	SEECP Parliamentary Assembly Connectivity	2014	Bucharest, Romania
WGJ	Western Balkans Working Group on Justice	2014	
ECRAN	Environment and Climate Regional Accession Network	2014	Vienna, Austria Belgrade, Serbia
EUSAIR	EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region	2014	Ljubljana, Slovenia
JWGMRPQ	Joint WG on Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications	2015	
CVE-FTF	Regional Platform for Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism	2015	Sarajevo, BiH
RWG Env	Regional Working Group on Environment	2016	
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office	2016	Tirana, Albania
WB6 CIF	WB6 Chamber Investment Forum	2017	Trieste, Italy
WBF	Western Balkan Fund	2017	Tirana, Albania
ECAA	European Common Aviation Area	2017	N
IISG	Integrative Internal Security Governance	2017	Sarajevo, BiH
SEEIST	SEE International Institute for Sustainable Technologies	2017	Geneva, Switzerland
TC	Transport Community	2019	Belgrade, Serbia
ESAP2	Employment and Social Affairs Platform	2019	Sarajevo, BiH
OB	Open Balkan	2021	Belgrade, Serbia; Skopje, North Macedonia; Tirana, Albania
RNWE	Regional Network of Women in Entrepreneurship	2022	
WB3C	Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre	2022	Montenegro
WBQ	Western Balkan QUAD	2023	

2 - Comparison between the recommendations of the CSF and the Chair's conclusions of the 2023 Tirana Summit of the Berlin Process, OBCT

TOPIC	CIVIL SOCIETY RECOMMENDATIONS	CHAIR'S CONCLUSION
CRM and access to the EU single market	The European Commission should present a plan with a **feasible timeline** to allow the markets of the WB6 to immediately access the EU Single Market in all areas that would not impose high adjustment costs and would be highly beneficial and visible for businesses and citizens with EU accession as the end goal.	No reference
	The Western Balkan governments should manifest their unequivocal commitment to implement and **monitor the implementation of the reforms** linked to the Single Market acquis.	No reference
	The European Commission and the Western Balkan leaders should ensure that the **policy dialogue on EU integration is open and transparent** to non-state actors.	No reference
Climate and Green Agenda	Both the EU and the Western Balkans countries share the responsibility of **enhancing Green Infrastructure** within the Western Balkans region. The EU should increase its **financial commitment** to align with Western Balkans needs and establish a funding mechanism that embodies the principle of **solidarity** and a **multi-level governance** approach mirroring the successful model of the EU Cohesion Funds	No reference
	A **strong administration** can maximize the EU integration opportunities. The Western Balkans Six should take swift action to enhance the capacities of national and sub-national authorities entrusted with environment and climate change responsibilities, including those responsible for programming and managing EU funds	The Western Balkans Six participants emphasized the need for increased investments in interconnectivity and infrastructure, and capacity building in relation to the acquis implementation concerning the environment, transport and energy sectors.
	Climate resilience cannot be achieved without investments in biodiversity and natural—based solutions. Leaders from the Western Balkans Six must secure sustainable funding for preserving and restoring the region's invaluable **natural resources**, with the goal of allocating 30% of national environmental and climate funds to **biodiversity protection** within the next five years. The EU should ensure that at least 30% of its climate—related funding for the Western Balkans is invested in biodiversity.	No reference
Digitalisation and connectivity	Establish a coordinated, regional approach to implementing the **EU Digital Services Act** or an equivalent regulatory instrument in the Western Balkans countries, to ensure equivalent safety and	Participants highlighted the importance of improving digital and broadband connectivity infrastructure, as well as the

	protection of online users in the region to those available in the EU	legal and regulatory framework between the EU and the Western Balkans in the digital area, including cybersecurity.
	Accelerate and facilitate the entrance of the Western Balkans countries into EU **digital single market**, ensuring that the entire region advances at the same pace wherever possible	No reference
	Advocate for the Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) and the Very Large Online Search Engines (VLOSEs) to expand the commitments of the Code of Practice against **Disinformation** (CoP) to the Western Balkans region	No reference
Energy	To re-establish and improve the legal framework governing the regional energy market(s), the EU should facilitate an independent assessment report to the European Parliament (and the national parliaments) on the implementation of the **Energy Community Treaty**, accompanied by a proposal for further actions to induce an appropriate debate on EU level.	No reference
	An inclusive and multi-stakeholder dialogue should be launched to negotiate an **extension** to the Energy Community Treaty with necessary amendments, instead of annexing the existing Treaty. The platform should include stakeholders from the Energy Community, EU and its member states and the Western Balkan states.	No reference
	The EU and its member states and the Western Balkan states should establish a **funding mechanism** to finance economic **restructuring of the coal regions** and to combat **energy poverty**, based on the existing platforms of the European Commission.	No reference
Mobility	Facilitate and finance the establishment of a comprehensive all-inclusive **regional mobility framework** agreement including students, researchers, university administrative staff, experts in the research and innovation ecosystem and professionals in related areas within the WB6.	The participants welcomed the entry into force of the three mobility agreements signed in Berlin in November 2022 for Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia and called for ratification/approval of these agreements by all of Western Balkans partners.
	Support and co-finance the establishment of a **Western Balkans Research Fund**, as a dedicated mechanism through specific granting and supporting schemes on mobility, knowledge transfer, access to infrastructure and engagement of diaspora in research and innovation ecosystem within the Western Balkans and with the EU, addressing the current shortcomings of the Widening Participation and Horizon Europe programmes.	The participants welcomed the recommendations of the Joint Science Conference held in Tirana, between 18 and 20 September 2023, regarding the need to boost investments in research and innovation, as well as to establish Research and Technology Excellence Hubs and Universities of Excellence in the Western Balkans, as well as regional research funds. These actions should contribute to a stronger integration of the Western Balkans into the European Research Area and the European Education Area. They welcomed the recommendation to renew and expand the Widening call for the Western Balkans in Horizon Europe. They also commended the
	Western Balkans Governments must commit to increase the percentage of **investment in research and innovation up to 2% of GDP by 2030** to nurture a generation of researchers, experts, innovators, and thinkers who can redefine the	

	region's future, provide avenues for brain circulation, and attract talents by engaging with peers in the region, EU and diaspora and strengthen integration in European Research Area.	regional transnational cooperation and mobility in higher education, research, and innovation.
Politics of enlargement	The European Commission should prepare **individual accession action plans** (AAPs) that will contain **intermediary milestones** as incentives for each candidate country	No reference
	Dispute resolution efforts should run in parallel to the implementation of the accession action plans (AAPs)	Participants encouraged European efforts to engage with the parties, with the aim to unblock the EU-facilitated normalization dialogue and, by doing so, unblock regional cooperation and respective EU paths of the WB6.
	The European Council should enable the European Commission to make use of the existing mechanisms for immediate **reporting** and triggering of **sanctions** for violations or backsliding in the area of **rule of law**	The Western Balkans Six participants asked for the continuous support of EU and the EU participating States for the efforts of the Western Balkans in the area of strengthening rule of law, fight against organized crime and in their EU accession paths.
Security and Geopolitics	In 2024, the national authorities in the Western Balkans should focus on establishing a **screening mechanism** for Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), or at least agree on regionally accepted standards for screening of investments.	No reference
	The European Commission should establish a financial facility solely dedicated to supporting **reconciliation** projects in the Western Balkans. For the new legislative term, the European Commission/DG-NEAR should put forward a proposal for the establishment of such a programme, under IPA, Global Europe, or another adequate instrument	No reference
	During 2024, the European Commission should propose concrete measures on the integration of the Western Balkan countries in the work of the European Union Agency for **Cybersecurity** (ENISA), as well as in the EU Cybersecurity Incident Review Mechanism.	The participants stressed that building stronger cooperation in the area of cybersecurity is critical, including coordinated operational and technical support, and setting a platform to enable early warnings of cyber threats and share practices and experience. (...) They called for an ongoing high-level dialogue on cybersecurity and closer coordination at a regional level, as facilitated by the Regional Cooperation Council.

3. List of interviews

1. Adnan Ćerimagić, analyst at the European Stability Initiative (ESI)
2. Ana Krstinovska, founder and president of the think tank Estima and research fellow at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)
3. Nenad Đurđević, advisor to the President of the Serbian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Head of the Regional Council for Strategic and Policy Initiatives (RCSPI)

Prodotti Editoriali Del Progetto

Articoli e interviste

Balcani nell'Ue, integrazione graduale?, Gentiola Madhi, 29/01/2024
ITA+ENG

Ćerimagić: cooperazione regionale sì, ma con l'adesione UE, Gentiola Madhi, 11/03/2024
ITA+ENG

Balcani: gli ostacoli alla cooperazione economica regionale, Gentiola Madhi, 23/04/2024
ITA+ENG

Balcani occidentali, cooperazione fuori dal ghetto, Gentiola Madhi, 26/07/2024
ITA+ENG

Open Balkan, un passo sbagliato nella giusta direzione, Sava Mirković, 20/08/2024
ITA+ENG

Webinar

Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and gradual integration to the EU

Regional cooperation is a pillar of the EU integration and stabilization process of the Western Balkan countries. Over the past two decades, the number of regional cooperation initiatives has increased, while the EU enlargement process has faced a slowdown. Against a backdrop of uncharted waters for the enlargement process, this webinar aims at assessing the achievements of key regional mechanisms and initiatives in terms of reinforced WB6 regional cooperation and the prospects of these countries' gradual integration to the EU.

A webinar was organized in June 2024 to share some preliminary results of the mapping activity and to discuss the above topics with some project researchers (Luisa Chiodi, Scientific Director, OBCT; Gentiola Madhi, Researcher, OBCT; Anna Ferro, Researcher, CeSPI; Sabina de Silva, Researcher, CeSPI) and key experts (Ambassador Andrea Cascone, Head of the Unit

for the Adriatic and the Balkans, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation; Marta Szpala, Senior fellow, Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW); Nenad Durđević, President of the Serbian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Head of the Regional Council for Strategic and Policy Initiative).
Some questions have been addressed and raised along the different contributions and the overall discussion.
To what extent can economic growth push the Western Balkan countries to greater cooperation - is this driver effective enough to further the EU integration process of the WB?
What can be expected from the just approved Growth Plan for the Western Balkans? Will the countries of the region be able to efficiently absorb the available funds?
In a comparative perspective, which are the main benefits and obstacles to achieving regional economic cooperation in the Balkans?
How to assess the WB regional cooperation between civil society actors and stakeholders? How can they contribute to enhancing wider cooperation among the countries of the region?
The 10th edition of the Berlin Process Summit will take place in Berlin on October 14, 2024. What could be expected from this next Summit? Is the Berlin Process still a viable initiative?
Elements from the webinar discussion have been incorporated in the final research document.

Registrazione disponibile al link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sVgfXmchys&t=2s

Comunicazione OBCT & CeSPI

LinkedIn - X - Facebook

Data	Link	ENG	ITA	Note
16.10.2023	https://www.facebook.com/BalcaniCaucaso/posts/pfbid02fZUzfMdYTJE8FB4YveunTjkY8QA119QPgjy5thitdZ2C5VXUxU2CrbEg6b2AArysl		x	Summit processo di Berlino a Tirana
29.01.2024	https://www.facebook.com/BalcaniCaucaso/posts/pfbid02hM88wgsfUbomDAm739DZmf63zjLWMNjmeJfu5AgyY1DYJvCJoWMjn5i2FrB9kpR9l		x	Balcani nell'UE, integrazione graduale?
29.01.2024	https://twitter.com/BalcaniCaucaso/status/1751948311886430665		x	Balcani nell'UE, integrazione graduale?
06.02.2024	https://www.facebook.com/share/p/8MJKkQsDnU1gEmAJ/		x	Balcani nell'UE, integrazione graduale?
11.03.2024	https://twitter.com/BalcaniCaucaso/status/1767146449488236818		x	: cooperazione regionale sì, ma con l'ade
11.03.2024	https://www.facebook.com/BalcaniCaucaso/posts/pfbid0w1pSg4ruZrXVXAwqaQ4vVZjEr8L2MSLPsKpoKFxJSBMRZwFXsWC8Dpp95EoJukP8l		x	: cooperazione regionale sì, ma con l'ade
11.03.2025	https://www.facebook.com/share/p/nncS8XSTxd54FJBc/		x	: cooperazione regionale sì, ma con l'ade
15.03.2026	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/cespiroma_%C4%87erimagi%C4%87-cooperazione-regionale-s%C3%AC-ma-activity-7174450866169536513-		x	: cooperazione regionale sì, ma con l'ade

	ylVy?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop			
23.04.2024	https://www.facebook.com/BalcaniCaucaso/posts/pfbid0ckhWEbSaEsFHwHCeFjPZf6Spc9jZDHVnXqMUQeeDSTtTmQtf7QW9vRkTTQ3ugUYTl		x	gli ostacoli alla cooperazione economica r
23.04.2024	https://twitter.com/BalcaniCaucaso/status/1782682220773199919		x	gli ostacoli alla cooperazione economica r
24.04.2024	https://www.facebook.com/BalkansCaucasus/posts/pfbid02gysteF3FiVyEzDS5DBJGdSR6WJ2NDQmKxvfndihZHgNbe6X6ENFAQBTN76puaKocl	x		till many obstacles to regional economic i
24.04.2024	https://twitter.com/BalkansCaucasus/status/1783079184497058109	x		till many obstacles to regional economic i
25.04.2025	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/cespiroma_balcani-gli-ostacoli-alla-cooperazione-economica-activity-7189239269637451776-4ktH?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop		x	gli ostacoli alla cooperazione economica r
26.04.2024	https://www.facebook.com/share/p/QLNJriBFw8FvJruS/		x	gli ostacoli alla cooperazione economica r
29.04.2024	https://twitter.com/CeSPI_Roma/status/1784855611055685866		x	Balcani, gli ostacoli alla cooperazione economica regionale
28.05,2024	https://twitter.com/CeSPI_Roma/status/1795460522218774892	x		Webinar
29.05,2025	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/cespiroma_western-balkans-eu-activity-7201605982374793217-XqXn?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop	x		Webinar
01.06.2024	https://business.facebook.com/BalcaniCaucaso/posts/857331503080504		x	Webinar
04.06.2024	https://business.facebook.com/BalcaniCaucaso/posts/857331503080504		x	Webinar
05.06.2024	https://facebook.com/cespiroma/videos/432282769760951/	x		Webinar
26.07.2024	https://twitter.com/BalcaniCaucaso/status/1816732049283203182	x		Balcani occidentali, cooperazione fuori dal ghetto
26.07.2024	https://business.facebook.com/BalcaniCaucaso/posts/890726789740975		x	Balcani occidentali, cooperazione fuori dal ghetto
20.08.2024	https://business.facebook.com/BalcaniCaucaso/posts/907144358099218		x	alkans, un passo sbagliato nella direzione
20.08.2024	https://business.facebook.com/BalkansCaucasus/posts/pfbid08LUXiHt4bKRcYipopwo2A8tNFFTPG3tkhwEVH4ohzTTEM66AUtgLBifBjVCE7Futl	x		Open Balkans, a failed step in the right direction
03.09.2024	https://www.facebook.com/share/p/XBhmXxEupHQwNBf8/		x	
23.09.2024	https://www.linkedin.com/posts/cespiroma_open-balkan-un-passo-sbagliato-nella-giusta-activity-7244023153331490816-U8jT?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop		x	alkans, un passo sbagliato nella direzione
23.09.2024	https://www.facebook.com/share/p/oTt8bfz1ZR9TLNXJ/		x	alkans, un passo sbagliato nella direzione