



# **Emergence and Challenges of Territorial Cooperation beyond EU's borders. Regional development in a transnational perspective in the Western Balkans**

**(course support)**

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**The Legitimacy  
of New Regionalism  
in the European  
Integration Process**



FROM EXCLUSIVE BORDERS  
TO INCLUSIVE FRONTIERS  
IN THE **Western  
Balkans**



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## Introduction

One of the great challenges of contemporary Europe is related to the process of integration and the need for European integration of different communities and regions. Evaluations conducted have shown that there is a great need for expertise and policies regarding the development of the European integration process. New geopolitical realities, associated with a process of national-identity emancipation, have led to the redrawing of political maps in South East Europe. Slowly, societies from this space matured and the injuries of the past began to heal. Even though there are still many open wounds, a reconciliation process has begun at the level of public discourse, at the political level and even at the level of identity.

The process of European integration seemed to be the solution in the context of widespread aspirations of the populations of these states towards the EU accession. Even if in the past years the process was promising, the actual situation shows that this is a highly contested and unfinished project. The idea of regional cooperation or regionalism, seen as policy cooperation in different areas among geographically proximate neighbors, has been a main tendency in the foreign policies of the countries, particularly in Europe. The above external explanations of regional cooperation are particularly important in cases of conflictual or post conflict, developing and aid dependent societies like the Western Balkans.

As a result, or we can call it as a consequence, both the WB countries and the EU face the challenge that the accession and integration process needs to be legitimate, efficient, effective, successful and sustainable.

To achieve an overall, harmonious development, the EU continues on its path towards strengthening economic, social and territorial cohesion. The European Union aims to diminish disparities among its developed and underdeveloped regions. As such, member states and neighboring countries must build their economic policies while ensuring European set objectives are met. Through these objectives, the EU actually supports the acceleration of economic, social and territorial integration<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Lucian Paul, *The Role of Cohesion Policy in the Development of Romania*, in Studies in Business and Economics no. 14(3)/2019, p. 97-98



Regions are playing a more and more emphasized role in European politics. These are acknowledged as actors in European politics. Still, it is not very obvious, what role do they play in European integration, or disintegration? It is not clear in our understanding what are the scope and objectives of the regions and of the policies implemented at their level<sup>2</sup>.

The lack of theoretical support underlying European regional development policies may appear astonishing, more especially when one considers that the European Union devotes about one third of its budget to the implementation of these policies<sup>3</sup>.

The European Union offers to the Member States and their regions various tools to support economic, social and territorial cohesion (financial, legal, and political). Economic, social and territorial cohesion is one of the areas of shared competence of the European Union and Member States.

European territorial cooperation, the cornerstone of European integration, is particularly important in terms of creating a common European area<sup>4</sup>. It has clear European added value – helps to ensure, that borders do not mean barriers, contributes to the rapprochement of Europeans and tackling common problems, easing the exchange of ideas, and supporting strategic actions aimed at achieving common goals<sup>5</sup>. Cross-border cooperation is a significant part of the European Union's Cohesion Policy and a key element of the European Union policy towards its neighbors. Territorial cooperation is considered to be an essential tool for achieving the cohesion objectives and therefore receives a new support and the funds allocated to it are increased. However, it is necessary to adopt concurrent measures aimed at removing obstacles that block its development<sup>6</sup>. European territorial cooperation plays an important role in removing barriers linked to borders and in strengthening cross-border cooperation. Its programs have achieved many results for the benefit of the citizens in the field of cross-border security, transport, education, energy, health care, training and job creation.

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<sup>2</sup> Julie Anna Braun, *Regional Policies and European Integration. From Policy to Identity*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p.5

<sup>3</sup> Sandy Dall' Erba, *European Regional Development Policies: History and Current Issues*, University of Illinois, Champaign, 2003, p. 1-2

<sup>4</sup> Tomáš Malatinec, Ján Kyjovský, *European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation – a legal form supporting cross-border cooperation in the European Union*, in *Juridical Tribune* Volume 9, Issue 1, March 2019, p. 263

<sup>5</sup> European Commission, *Cooperation between regions and member states*, 2019, Available online: [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/ro/policy/cooperation/](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/ro/policy/cooperation/)

<sup>6</sup> Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EC) No. 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on a European grouping of territorial cooperation (EGTC) as regards the clarification, simplification and improvement of the establishment and implementation of such groupings COM (2011) 610 final — 2011/0272 (COD).

Nonetheless, significant economic potential remains untapped in border areas. The reason is lack of trust or even negative attitudes among neighboring countries<sup>7</sup>.

Strong identity cleavages, which culminated in violent inter-ethnic conflicts, have profoundly marked Balkan societies. The new geopolitical realities, associated with a process of national-identity emancipation, have led to the redrawing of political maps in the Balkan space. Competition and mutual distrust marked the first two decades after the fall of communism. Slowly, these societies matured and the injuries of the past began to heal. Even though there are still many open wounds, a reconciliation process has begun at the level of public discourse, at the political level and even at the level of identity. This dialogue, nevertheless, is not obvious everywhere and by no means is it irreversible.

The European Union always proclaims the idea of an open door for the Western Balkans, but at almost all times adjoined by “*not yet*”. This indecision has led to deception at both the political and societal levels.

After the armed conflicts that followed the initial proclamation of independence in several of the Balkan countries, a period of consolidation came, along with European integration as well as cooperation and reconciliation efforts.

As a result, or we can call it as a consequence, both, WB countries and the EU face the challenge that the accession and integration process needs to be legitimate, efficient, effective, successful and sustainable. Even though negotiations have started and the process is ongoing, it is obvious that WB countries will need to align its existing negotiating structure with the new revised methodology of the EU.

The present material represents a course support for the course entitled ***Emergence and Challenges of Territorial Cooperation beyond EU's borders. Regional development in a transnational perspective in the Western Balkans***. The material was developed in the frame of the Jean Monnet project: ***WBREGIO - 101085662 - ERASMUS-JMO-2022-MODULE***, entitled ***The legitimacy of new regionalism in the European Integration process. From exclusive borders to inclusive frontiers in the Western Balkans*** and it should be used only for educational purpose.

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<sup>7</sup> European Commission, *Cross-border cooperation in the European Union*, 2019 Available online: [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/ro/newsroom/news/2015/09/cross-border-cooperation-in-the-european-union-an-opportunity-for-europe-s-border-regions](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/ro/newsroom/news/2015/09/cross-border-cooperation-in-the-european-union-an-opportunity-for-europe-s-border-regions)

## **Chapter I**

# **MODELS AND THEORIES OF DEVELOPMENT**

The interest for the process of development, especially the one which concerns regional development in the European framework, is relatively new in Central and Eastern Europe. The topic keeps its character of novelty both at the level of public policies as well as at the level of theories and academic studies. Until recently, the main theories and explanatory models of development were located mainly in the area of economic studies, where the focus was almost exclusively on the national level. The development process which was focusing on the local level and especially on the regional level was largely ignored. Although the phrase "regional development" is apparently easy to understand, a closer analysis reveals a series of difficulties regarding the term and its meaning.

By its nature, regional development is a discipline of pragmatism. The meaning and relevance of such a discipline consists mainly in its ability to guide and coordinate social intervention processes. It is not an exclusively academic discipline, it is one which represents the real and the achievable.

### **I.1 What is development**

The term development is an extremely often used one, but very often there are attributed to it intended, vague or confused meanings. Intuitively, we could say that it refers to an increase either quantitative or qualitative of something. But there is a multitude of other meanings: to present broadly a certain idea, to implement an idea, to implement a project, to progress, to improve, etc.<sup>8</sup>.

The major tendency is to consider development as a change which brings a number of benefits. Moreover, according to Rist this type of association with something better is the main aspect that determines the connection and the attachment of people with the term. However, development as it coagulates and gives shape to our hopes for the better, it does not have a unitary understanding. This is because the good of some (development in the acceptance of some actors) does not equate to the good of others (development according to the acceptance of other actors). From this point of view, we can talk about development only by referring to the finality of the development process and to the extent that this process determines a progress, or an improvement, a growth in accordance with the

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<sup>8</sup> Bill, Slee, – Endogenous development: a concept in search of a theory, in Options Mediterraneennes, S e , A /no 23, 1993, p. 14



goals, expectations and aspirations of those who initiated the process and of those who were targeted or affected by this<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, development is a relative and subjective term and it largely depends on the values and expectations of those who evaluate the development process. It can also generate many contradictions. For example, the rural area in Romania experienced a series of major transformations in terms of living conditions and lifestyle (new constructions, utilities, household electrical equipment, new culinary habits, manners spending free time, etc.). All these changes determined a closing up of the rural to the urban in terms of living conditions and lifestyle. But while for some inhabitants this represented a positive aspect and results of development and evolution for others it is a living proof of regression and involution. The development process determined the loss of identity and the giving up of traditional and cultures values. For the latter development does not in any way mean globalization and, even less, uniformity.

Based on these perceptions, we need to be aware of the costs generated by development and evolution and about the necessity of adopting a multidimensional vision for the development processes. In the last 100 years in which humanity has faced an extraordinary evolution and development, it can be understood as an involution if we take into account the fact that this development was made due to the wars, the aggravation of hunger in certain regions of the world or due to the environment and climate change.

In a slightly cynical view, Rist defines the development of the last decades as "the transformation and the destruction of the natural environment and of the social relations with the aim of increasing the production of goods and services"<sup>10</sup>

A variety of other authors analyze the so-called development process from the last decades. Most of these are harshly criticizing the economic approach of the development process (approach that puts in the center of the development term the economic growth). Basically, focusing only on the economic dimension of the development (economic centrism) we do nothing but we ignore a series of additional costs of this economic growth. Based on the perception of David Korten, the so-called developed modern societies have assumed materialism as a central value and they transformed hedonism into purpose but also into measure of human progress<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Gilbert Rist, *Development as a buzzword*, in *Development in Practice*, nr 4-5, 2007, p. 34-38

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p.488

<sup>11</sup> Korten, C. David – *Lumea post-corporatista*, ed. Antet 1999, p. 64

For Bauman, the economic development of modern societies is the result of the emergence of the consumer society. This promotes an unhealthy tendency of people to buy (sometimes compulsively) things they don't need, to build and satisfy new needs and to compete with themselves. Bauman points out that this type of "development" is not a healthy one<sup>12</sup>.

In conclusion, a few things should be remembered regarding the idea of development:

- there are a multitude of meanings attributed to the term development, although the general tendency is to consider development of a society only from the perspective of its economic growth.
- development is a subjective term and depends on values and the aspirations of those who relate to the socio-economic changes which are traditionally circumscribed to the term development.
- there is no unity regarding the dimensions of development. Through excellence, development is a multidimensional term - it implies both economic aspects as well as social or ecological aspects.

Over the time, the term development experienced an evolution and it was systematically charged with new meanings, something that also determined radical changes at the level of the measuring instruments. Below, we will present the some of the most important dimensions of development.

### **The economic dimension of development**

It is the oldest understanding of development and refers to the systematic growth of economic activities at global, national, regional level or local. Economic growth remains the most important dimension of development, however, has experienced a refinement of the way it is measured. There are a multitude of economic indicators used to measure and monitor the evolution and economic development:

- gross domestic product (GDP)
- gross domestic product per capita (GDP/capita)
  - work productivity
- the speed of money circulation
- trade balance (the result of economic exchanges with other countries or regions)

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<sup>12</sup> Bauman, Z., 'The 20th Century: The End or a Beginning?', Thesis Eleven 70, 2002, p. 15-25

### **The social dimension of development**

The exclusive focus on economic growth was over the time strongly criticized, especially because it highlighted the social problems created by this unidirectional approach. All these aspects related to social inequity determined the adoption of a different perspective, something more humanistic that led to the emergence and extensive use of another concept, human development.

This new approach of the development process is predominantly qualitative, which means that the growth process must predominantly serve the human dimensions and the social ones. Development must lead to the improvement of people's quality of life and expanding their abilities to shape their own future. There are three distinct types of indicators used internationally to measure and monitor the size of social development<sup>13</sup>:

- Human development index
- Human Freedom Index
- Quality of life indicators

**Human development index:** the measurement of human development is done through the index of human development (IDU) which includes three dimensions, each dimension having one equal weight in the final index. These dimensions are: longevity, education level and life standard<sup>14</sup>.

**Human Freedom Index:** Another social dimension of development is represented by equity or social justice. This dimension is based on the assumption that we can talk about the development of a society only to the extent that citizens have the guarantee of a series of rights and freedoms (human rights). In other words, a developed society is defined not through the prism of wealth it has but through the prism of individual freedoms. The Human Freedom indicator is based on the binary evaluation of the degree of respect/non-respect of fundamental human rights, resulting from the summation corresponding data for 40 sub-indicators<sup>15</sup>.

**Quality of life indicators:** This perspective puts quality of life of the individuals at the center of the development process. From this perspective, the stake of development process is improving the

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<sup>13</sup> United Nations, *Human Development Report*, New York, 2002, p. 193

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 195

<sup>15</sup> Charles Humana, *World Guide to Human Rights*, New York, 1986, p. 28-32

various aspects that contribute to the quality of life. Quality of life is a evaluative concept, being the result of reporting the living conditions and the activities that they compose human life, to human needs, values, aspirations. Compared to the other ways of conceiving and measuring development, the quality of life indicators offers a multidimensional perspective where development is the result of the simultaneous presence of several factors, but also a consideration of individual needs and aspirations. From this point of view, the quality of life perspective starts from the assumption that there is no universally valid standard of development and quality of life. This will always vary based on the demands, attitudes and expectations of individuals from a certain community society<sup>16</sup>.

### **The ecological dimension of development**

The concept of sustainable development is relatively new in modern literature. The concept of sustainable development was considered a new development paradigm and it was promoted within the UN in the early 80's. Thus, from the appearance of the first formulations regarding the concept of sustainable development until nowadays, its content has experienced a continuous improvement, by adding new coordinates, theoretical, methodological and practical values. Based on this we can observe a big variety of definitions. One of the most eloquent would be the definition created by Allen Robert, which says that sustainable development means the use of "species and ecosystems at levels and in ways that allow them to renew themselves for any purpose ... and serve development through which the satisfaction of human needs in the long term are achieved and improves the quality of life"<sup>17</sup>.

The common element between the definitions is the interdependence between economy, ecology and social-human and the need to plan and develop the three elements together.

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<sup>16</sup> Duane Elgin, *Choosing Earth. Humanity's Journey of Initiation Through Breakdown and Collapse to Mature Planetary Community*, 2022, p. 154-165

<sup>17</sup> Allan Robert, *How to save the World*, Barnes and Noble Books, New Jersey, 1980, p. 67-80

## I.2 Explanatory theories of development

All theories regarding development provide some important ideas both in terms of the development processes but also in terms of the factors that support and fuels development. To define these factors, we will use the generic term of capital. Thus, we can highlight the following types of capital that compete for the development of the human collectivities (be it country, region or locality)<sup>18</sup>.

**a. physical capital** = set of material resources available inside the community.

The physical capital is divided into:

- natural capital = existing natural resources
- financial capital = financial resources
- positioning capital = the geographical location of the respective community.

(positioning can constitute a competitive advantage in the conditions in which the respective collectivity is located near or in the vicinity of some development centers)

- infrastructure = the development level of the physical infrastructure which is available for the community<sup>19</sup>.

Physical capital is one of what economists call the three main factors of production. It consists of tangible, human-made goods that assist in the process of creating a product or service.

The term capital has no fixed conceptual definition, and various schools of economic thought have defined it differently. Physical capital is a subset of capital, and other subsets include financial capital (money), human capital, social capital, and knowledge capital. However, subdividing capital in that manner does not make physical capital a homogeneous substance, and both its definition and its measurement remain problematic<sup>20</sup>.

**b. human capital** = the set of socio-demographic characteristics that characterize the respective community. In general, this dimension includes aspects such as<sup>21</sup>:

- demographic density
- the state of health of the population
- the aging of the population

<sup>18</sup> Herbert Rubin, Irene Rubin, *Community Organizing and Development*, Pearson Education Inc, 2007, p. 45-56

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 63-71

<sup>20</sup> Paul C. Lewis, SAGE Publications's *Encyclopedia of Governance*, 2007, p.4

<sup>21</sup> Will Kenton, *Human Capital Definition: Types, Examples and Relationship to the Economy*, Investopedia, 2023, p. 3

- the level of education and professional training

The term human capital refers to the economic value of a citizen's experience and skills. Human capital includes assets like education, training, intelligence, skills, health, and other things a community value such as loyalty and punctuality. Human capital tends to migrate, especially in global economies. That's why there is often a shift from developing places or rural areas to more developed and urban areas. Some economists have dubbed this a brain drain or human capital flight. This describes the process that keeps certain areas underdeveloped while others become even more developed.

The idea of human capital can be traced back to the 18th century. Adam Smith referred to the concept in his book *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, in which he explored the wealth, knowledge, training, talents, and experiences of a nation. Adams suggested that improving human capital through training and education leads to a more profitable enterprise, which adds to the collective wealth of society<sup>22</sup>.

**c. cultural capital** = refers to the set of beliefs, values and attitudes dominant at the level of a community that have a direct influence on the development process<sup>23</sup>:

- work ethics - the way they work is perceived and valued
- entrepreneurial spirit and risk-taking (culture of entrepreneurship)
- solidarity and cohesion (social capital and the culture of helping)

The idea of cultural capital refers to the social assets that people have that they may use to attain success and social mobility. Cultural capital is important because it helps provides people with the tools needed to succeed in contemporary society<sup>24</sup>.

If the resources available for a region or a human community in general are generous and can confer a comparative advantage for the certain community, it is not mandatory for that community to be a developed one. The contribution of the cultural capital, the dominant cultural characteristics of certain collectivities in the development process it is extremely important but very difficult to capture.

<sup>22</sup> World Bank, *Building Human Capital*, 2018, p.12-17

<sup>23</sup> Max Weber, *Etica protestanta si spiritul capitalismului*, ed. Incitatus, 2003, p. 22-35

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Cultural Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Green European Journal, 2022, p. 2

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## **Chapter II**

# **THEORETICAL FRAME OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

### **II.1. Definition and typology of regions**

There is a rich literature dedicated to this question what is a region? And of course, there is a big variety of answers. A possible and very simple answer is that a region is a determined territory with certain specific features. But, to be able to give a more appropriate and useful definition we must take into account the purpose it serves.

There is at least one common part between all given definitions, and this is the fact that a region is a geographical area representing an entity, for which important statements can be made, which are valid for the entire surface (viewed as a unitary whole). Aggregation is useful from descriptive point of view, because it involves a smaller number of aspects that they must be handled, presented, perceived. It is much easier to present certain aspects at a higher level (region), as a sum or as an average, rather than presenting the same aspects for each lower level (locality)<sup>25</sup>. Following the same reasoning, aggregation is useful for the economic analysis of the information and is even more important as there are strong links of interdependence between subunits or between the activities carried out in that area, so that the whole represents more than a simple summation of the parts. Aggregation is also necessary from the administrative point of view, for formulating and implementing public plans and policies. In this case it should be mentioned that the most suitable regional groupings are those which respects administrative-legal boundaries<sup>26</sup>.

Another characteristic of the region is the regional consciousness of a common regional interest, this is making possible the so-called joint efforts to improve the welfare of the area. Common interests can be reflected in different ways, but the basic idea is represented by the high degree of correlation of the economic experience of the areas that form the region as well as the interest groups in each sub-area.

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<sup>25</sup> Hölcker, N., 2004, Regionen in Europa. Gewinner oder Verlierer des europäischen Einigungsprozesses? Eine Betrachtung des Bedeutungswandels der Regionen in Europa am Beispiel der europäischen Regional und Strukturpolitik von 1957 bis heute, Tectum, Marburg

<sup>26</sup> Roth, K., 2007, What is Region? Southeast European Regions Between Globalization, EU-Integration and Marginalization, in: Roth, K., Brunnbauer, U. (eds.), Region, Regional Identity and Regionalism in Southeastern Europe, part I, Ethnologia Balkanika, Journal of Southeast European Anthropology, vol. 11/2007, LIT Verlag, Berlin, pp. 17-42

As research into regions has developed and become more popular, various modes of conceptual interpretation have been applied to coin a range of definitions of the region. The concept has been most frequently described and defined in geography (physical and geographical region) and economic geography (socio-economic region)<sup>27</sup>.

**Table 1. Selected definitions of the region**

| <b>Author</b>                          | <b>Definition</b>                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| T. J. Woofer                           | An area within which the combination of environmental and demographic factors have created a homogeneity of economic and social structure.                                        |
| R. S. Platt                            | An area delineated on the basis of the general homogeneity of land character and occupancy.                                                                                       |
| American Society of Planning Officials | An area wherein there has grown one characteristic human pattern of adjustment to the environment.                                                                                |
| P. Vidal de la Blache                  | A domain where many dissimilar beings, artificially brought together, have subsequently adapted themselves to a common existence.                                                 |
| R. E. Dickinson                        | An area throughout which a particular set of physical conditions will lead to a particular type of economic life.                                                                 |
| W. L. G. Joerg                         | An area whose physical conditions are homogenous                                                                                                                                  |
| N. M. Fenneman                         | An area characterized throughout by similar surface features and which is contrasted with neighboring areas.                                                                      |
| A. J. Herbertson                       | A complex of land, water, air, plant, animal and man regarded in their special relationships, as together constituting a definite, characteristic portion of the earth's surface. |
| K. Young                               | A geographic area unified culturally, unified at first economically and later by consensus of thought, education, recreation, etc. which distinguishes it from other areas.       |

Source: Minshull (2009, p. 18)

In the literature on the subject, in particular in regional studies and economic geography, numerous typologies of regions emerge. Their form depends on how the concept is understood and on the classification criteria applied.

<sup>27</sup> Anna Bernaciak, *The Concept and Typology of Regions*, in *Regional Development and the Baltic Sea Region*, CSD Uppsala, 2014, p. 86-87

Keating and Loughlin distinguish four types of regions: economic, historical/ethnic, administrative and political. Economic regions are territories with defined economic characteristics that meet certain criteria, for example industrial and non-industrial, urban and rural, or regions where a certain type of economic activity is concentrated<sup>28</sup>.

**Historical regions** are identified as territories marked by the activity of societies with common roots and cultural or linguistic features other than those dominating in the given territory of a nation-state culture, where these societies function or functioned.

**Administrative regions** are the objects of administrative activity at one level below the central authorities, or territories distinguished for statistical reasons. To differentiate between administrative and political regions, Keating and Loughlin indicate that the latter have democratically elected authorities with a defined range of powers to make autonomous politico-administrative decisions.

Hölcker presents a typical typology, dividing regions into administrative, economic, social and cultural<sup>29</sup>.

Roth takes a different stand, assuming the level of spatial organization as a criterion to distinguish regions. He lists microregions, mezuregions, macroregions and global regions.

- **Microregions** are the smallest regions, ranging from a spatial unit at a community level (e.g. town, locality, village) to an administrative district. Their sizes are relatively small and correspond to the area of everyday interactions and activities of their inhabitants. In EU NUTS terminology they equate to the NUTS 3 level (e.g. the region of Belgrade, Bucharest or Saloniki).

- **Mezuregions** are medium-sized units. The common use of the notion of 'region' refers to these entities. They usually encompass an area larger than a microregion but smaller than the territory of a state. They usually have their own name or history and they exist in the social consciousness. Mezuregions are equivalent to the NUTS 2 or NUTS 1 level (e.g. Istria, North-West Bulgaria).

- **Macroregions** exceed the territory of a state but are smaller than a continent (e.g. the Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe, Scandinavia).

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<sup>28</sup> Keating, M., Loughlin, J., 2004, *Introduction*, in: Keating, M., Loughlin, J. (eds.), *The Political Economy of Regionalism*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, pp. 1-13.

<sup>29</sup> Hölcker, N., *Regionen in Europa. Gewinner oder Verlierer des europäischen Einigungsprozesses? Eine Betrachtung des Bedeutungswandels der Regionen in Europa am Beispiel der europäischen Regional und Strukturpolitik von 1957 bis heute*, Tectum, Marburg, 2004, p. 36-41

• **Global regions** occupy significant parts of continents, or areas that go beyond the borders of the continents and function in general consciousness as regions (e.g. the Baltic Region, the Mediterranean, the Pacific Region)<sup>30</sup>.

Schmitt-Egner presents another typology developed on the basis of two contradictory notions of vertical and horizontal regions<sup>31</sup>:

- **horizontal region** is a unit, or niche of activity or operations. This group encompasses structural and administrative regions as well as regions of cultural identification, providing an arena of interregional exchange and interaction.
- **vertical region** is a space of activity performed primarily by states or international organizations, local authorities and local communities.

**Table 2. Typology of regions according to Schmitt-Egner**

| <b>Horizontal regions</b>         |                                      |                                                                  |                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Type of region</i>             | <i>Dominating actors</i>             | <i>Dominating type of relations</i>                              | <i>Dominating type of abilities/skills</i>                                            |
| Region of cultural identification | cultural and political               | internal relations                                               | symbolical and formal abilities                                                       |
| Administrative region             | political                            | balanced internal and external relations                         | formal and physical abilities                                                         |
| Structural region                 | economic                             | external relations                                               | physical abilities                                                                    |
| <b>Vertical regions</b>           |                                      |                                                                  |                                                                                       |
| <i>Type of region</i>             | <i>Ways of functioning</i>           | <i>Dominating actors</i>                                         | <i>Fields of activity</i>                                                             |
| International region              | international regional organizations | states                                                           | geopolitics, economy and international governance                                     |
| Transnational region              | transnational regional organizations | subnational and transnational operating units (e.g. euroregions) | integration of goals of regional policies, economies, culture and environmental goals |
| Subnational region                | regional and local authorities       | regional actors: individuals, groups, communities                | preservation, management and development of tangible and intangible heritage          |

Source: Schmitt-Egner. Source: Schmitt-Egner (2002, pp. 184-188)

<sup>30</sup> Roth, K., 2007, *What is Region? Southeast European Regions Between Globalization, EU-Integration and Marginalization*, in: Roth, K., Brunnbauer, U. (eds.), *Region, Regional Identity and Regionalism in Southeastern Europe*, part I, *Ethnologia Balkanica*, Journal of Southeast European Anthropology, vol. 11/2007, LIT Verlag, Berlin, pp. 17-42.

<sup>31</sup> Schmitt-Egner, P., 2002, *The Concept Of "Region": Theoretical And Methodological Notes On Its Reconstruction*, in: *European Integration*, Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 179-200.

Generally, all the definitions coined on this basis boil down to two fundamental ways of describing the region as an objective spatial-economic category and an intellectual concept. The former conceptual framework encompasses such designates as territory, specific internal construction (concentration around a core with central/dominating functions, occurrence of relations and interdependencies reflected in the flows within a region, etc.), potential, specialization, a certain ‘autonomy’ and individual character. This approach fully conforms to the historical process of the development of regions located in a defined geographical space and functioning in certain economic, social, and cultural conditions characterized by dynamic changes and diversity<sup>32</sup>.

## II.2. NUTS classification

A region can be defined as an area, territory with a set of internal, own distinct characteristics, whether physical or human and which give a certain unity and which on the other hand distinguish it from other neighboring areas. There are a number of criteria’s that can contribute to the delimitation of a region, basically these are theoretically unlimited: from physical attributes, socio-economic characteristics, up to language characteristics, etc. Also, the typology of regions involves the use of a scale to determine diversity: cultural regions, geographical regions, historical regions, etc.

At the level of the European Union, at the beginning of the 70s, the economic territory of the EU was divided into standardized territorial units to provide a comparable level for gathering information on disparities at the level of the Member States, so that can measure the effectiveness of interventions from the European Fund for Regional Development.

It can therefore be observed that this division was made for statistical reasons and by collecting information, by creating a unitary territorial system called NUTS<sup>33</sup> (Nomenclature of Statistical Territorial Units). This classification has a threefold purpose:

- facilitates the collection, the development and the harmonization of EU regional statistics
- allows the socio-economic analysis of the regions
- provides the framework for defining regional policies of the EU.

<sup>32</sup> Anna Bernaciak, *The Concept and Typology of Regions*, in *Regional Development and the Baltic Sea Region*, CSD Uppsala, 2014, p. 86-87

<sup>33</sup> Noenclature des Unites Territoriales Statistiques



The regulation that gave NUTS a legal status was adopted in May 2003 and entered into force in July 2003<sup>34</sup>. This regulation was amended with the accession to the EU of the new 10 member states in 2004<sup>35</sup> and after the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007<sup>36</sup>. The last modification of the regulation was made in 2011<sup>37</sup>. The NUTS classification must be preserved, unchanged for a period of at least 3 years.

The NUTS system is a hierarchical classification on three spatial levels from the smallest units to the largest, having a regional character. Through this system each member state is subdivided into a number of major socio-economic regions, level:

- NUTS 1 (for smaller countries this may even be the national level).
- each of these are subdivided into NUTS 2 level regions (basic regions for application of regional policies)
- which in turn are divided into NUTS 3 level regions (small regions used for specific analyzes and policies).

It should be mentioned here that not in all cases, regions classified according to NUTS are administrative-territorial-units (ex. the development regions of Romania). Also, not all countries could be divided into the three levels, due to the small size of some (ex. Luxembourg, for which all three levels correspond to level national).

The main criterion used in the NUTS classification is population size. Size average of NUTS 2 regions is approx. 2.0 million inhabitants, respectively 13,000 km<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 May 2003 on the establishment of a common classification of territorial units for statistics (NUTS) (Official Journal L 154, 21/06/2003)

<sup>35</sup> Regulation (EC) No 1888/2005 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 October 2005 amending Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003 on the establishment of a common classification of territorial units for statistics (NUTS) by reason of the accession of the Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia to the European Union (Official Journal L 309, 25 November 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Regulation (EC) No 176/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 February 2008 amending Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003 on the establishment of a common classification of territorial units for statistics (NUTS) by reason of the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the European Union (Official Journal L 061, 5 March 2008).

<sup>37</sup> Regulation (EC) No 31/2011 of 17 January 2011 amending annexes to Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a common classification of territorial units for statistics (NUTS).

**Table 3. Demographic thresholds used in the NUTS classification (inhabitants)**

| Level  | Minimum   | Maximum   |
|--------|-----------|-----------|
| NUTS 1 | 3 million | 7 million |
| NUTS 2 | 800.000   | 3 million |
| NUTS 3 | 150.000   | 800.000   |

Source: EUROSTAT, *Regions in the EU, Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics NUTS 2010/EU-27, 2011*

At the local level, two more levels of "Local administrative units" type are defined (LAU):

- LAU 1 represents the districts (micro-regions)
- LAU 2 is the level represented of localities, municipalities or other equivalent form of local organization.

The current NUTS nomenclature, in force from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2025, divides the economic territory of the European Union into 91 NUTS level 1 regions, 242 NUTS 2 level regions and 1166 NUTS 3 level regions<sup>38</sup>.

Although the aim of the system is to ensure that there are regions at the same NUTS level comparable in size, there are, however, at each level large differences in terms of surface, population, economic power or administrative powers. From territorial point of view of the largest regions are in Finland and Sweden. If the population is taken into account, we also have differences: NUTS 1 – Germany and Italy with 18 and 15 million, respectively, and at the opposite pole Finland with 26,000, NUTS 2 - France with 11 million, while 14 regions (Austria, Belgium, Greece) have less than 300,000 inhabitants. The Cohesion policy is implemented at the level of NUTS 2 regions<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> Eurostat, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts/background>, accessed in 30.04.23

<sup>39</sup> Idem



### II.3. The process of regionalization and types of regionalization in Europe

**Regional policy** is connected with the notion of socio-economic development based on the policy of economic and social cohesion and has as its objective to promote balanced territorial development and the prevention or the reduction of development disparities. For regional policy (or regional development) the existence of the state and the regions are necessary<sup>40</sup>. This assures the frame and the space for initiatives and regional policy implementation. But, does not automatically imply the existence of the "regionalization" process in the sense of the definition from below (as a political process). However, in reality, the effect of regional community policy can accelerate this political process.

**Regionalization** can be defined as the process by which the autonomous action capabilities, are established. The main objective of the process is to promote a territory, subnational or supralocal, by mobilizing its economic mechanisms. Also, if it is the case, it can promote solidarity resorts and the development of the local or regional potential. This process can be carried out either through the institutions pre-existing, either by creating a new territorial division designed to respond and support the established objectives. However, this process is always conditioned by the constraints and pressures created by the political and institutional framework, which evolution can be governed by a series of trends<sup>41</sup>.

**Regionalism** is a term often encountered in political discourse. The purpose or the finality of this can lead to federalization (a territorial ensemble built on historical and cultural bases, which acquires competences in matters of public policies - this is the case of the German Lands). It is different from regionalization, which is an administrative action, aimed to create a larger space for cooperation and, last but not least, to define new administrative-territorial units<sup>42</sup>.

The concept of regions / regionalization is closely related to the concept of decentralization and by the concept of deconcentrating.

<sup>40</sup> Barna, Radu Cristian – Dezvoltare regională în Europa, Ed. Fundației pentru Studii Europene, 2007, p. 13

<sup>41</sup> Pacesila, Mihaela – Regionalizarea în statele Uniunii Europene, Administrație și management public, Nr. 3/2004, p. 11

<sup>42</sup> The Web Book of Regional Science, Regional Research Institute, West Virginia University: <http://www.rrl.wvu.edu/WebBook/Giarratani/contents.htm>, accessed in 03.04.2023



**Deconcentration.** EU member states have experienced the process of regionalization from above down, respectively the deconcentration process, which has as a main objective strengthening local and regional powers in the development and the implementation of public policies. The reason of this deconcentration process is both political (the need for more democracy), as well as for economic reasons (the need for greater efficiency of public policies)<sup>43</sup>.

The characteristics of deconcentration: the characteristics of administrative centralization are maintained with an exception: in the territory there are no more simple agents of the center but proper administrative authorities, which have their own competences. These structures are appointed and revoked by the center authorities, to which they are subordinate and responsible. Decentralized authorities can adapt the measures and orders sent from the center to local specifics.

Deconcentration can have 2 main directions<sup>44</sup>:

- **Vertically:** it increases the competences of the external services of the ministries and/or other bodies from the central administration;
- **Horizontally:** the competences of the service manager from an administrative constituency are amplified

**Decentralization** means the transmission or the transfer of a significant part of the attributions, powers and responsibilities of the central government and other central administration bodies to local public authorities and administration bodies. The reason of decentralization (bottom-up governance) lies, first of all, in the desire of the regions to have a role in the European and international policy<sup>45</sup>.

Characteristics of decentralization: the state ceases to be the only recognized territorial collectivity and the only legal entity of public law. Local territorial communities have legal personality and own public interest, distinct from those of the state. Local communities have own administrative authorities for the satisfaction of local public interests as well as for necessary material, financial and human means. The representative authorities at local level, are elected by the local

<sup>43</sup> Edwards, Mary E. – Regional and Urban Economics and Economic Development. Theory and Methods, Auerbach Publications, 2007, p. 24

<sup>44</sup> The Web Book of Regional Science, Regional Research Institute, West Virginia University: <http://www.rr.i.wvu.edu/WebBook/Giarratani/contents.htm>, accessed in 03.04.2023

<sup>45</sup> Constantin, Daniela Luminița – Introducere în teoria și practica dezvoltării regionale, Ed. Economica, 2000, p. 6

communities, by universal suffrage, therefore, power and legitimacy does not come from the center but from the electoral body that elected them<sup>46</sup>. There is only an administrative tutelage that assumes the existence of a control of legality by the courts.

Benefits of decentralization: a faster problem solving - depending on the local specifics and local resources of every administrative-territorial unit. A greater efficiency in the use of material, human, and financial resources and guided to respond to certain needs, priorities, which local authorities know better than central authorities.

Local public services are organized, coordinated and managed by local authorities in compliance with local needs. The operativeness of the decision making no longer requires approvals from center. The elected officials answer directly to the electoral body; allows promotion of participatory management in managing the interests of each local community.

Disadvantages (minor compared to advantages): decentralization can diminish the strength of the central power and may hinder its action. Local interests sometimes have a much narrower character than the general interests of the country.

The result of this dual process of decentralization and decentralization was the increase of the regions role in national policy making, but also in the implementation of European policies at national level. This means that in terms of formulation, initiation, implementation and monitoring of the policies implemented on the territory of the region, the regions has a bigger influence<sup>47</sup>.

There are various forms of regional governments, and it is practically impossible to find one commune European form for regional government. This is due to the political, legislative and administrative diversity that characterize the states of the European Union. From the legal status point of view, the term region, like the term regionalization, covers extremely different political and administrative realities in the majority of the European states.

In a report to the European Parliament (*La regionalisation en Europe*), G. Marcou, identifies 5 types of regionalization in Europe, depending on the place the region occupies within the constitutional and administrative structures<sup>48</sup>.

- 1. Administrative regionalization:** consists in the creation by the state of some authorities subordinated to the government, decentralized (delegation), which implies the existence of a

<sup>46</sup> Barna, Radu Cristian – *Dezvoltare regională în Europa*, Ed. Fundației pentru Studii Europene, 2007, p. 87

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, p. 97

<sup>48</sup> Gerard, Marcou, *La regionalisation en Europe*, Série politique régionale REGI 108 FR/rév. 1, 1999, p.17-34

certain legal autonomy, but the actions are controlled by the state. This type of regionalization does not actually imply the administrative existence of the region. In the EU, administrative regionalization characterizes Greece, Portugal, Great Britain, Sweden, Slovenia, Hungary, Estonia and Lithuania<sup>49</sup>;

2. **Regionalization through local public administrations:** Neither in this case the existence of regions is not mandatory from an administrative point of view, but some administrative functions are taken over by local administrations through decentralization (cooperation in a broad framework). It differs from administrative regionalization by the fact that regionalization is carried out through decentralized institutions that acts in its own power framework. This type of system is fundable in Germany, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Hungary<sup>50</sup>;
3. **Regional decentralization:** implies the creation of a new territorial and administrative entity, with limited financial autonomy, a specific institutional framework is being developed. However, these units do not have legislative power. Regional decentralization is found in France, Great Britain, Sweden, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia<sup>51</sup>;
4. **Political decentralization or regional autonomy** (institutional regionalism): presupposes the existence of regions as territorial administrative units to which also assigns legislative power. This requires modification to the constitution and affects the structure of the state. Basically, governments are established at regional level. This regionalization model is considered the ideal model and it can be found in Spain, Italy, Belgium, Great Britain, Portugal<sup>52</sup>;
5. **Regionalization through federal authorities / federal structures:** presupposes the existence of a type of state characterized by increased decentralization, operating on the

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<sup>49</sup> The Web Book of Regional Science, Regional Research Institute, West Virginia University: <http://www.rr.i.wvu.edu/WebBook/Giarratani/contents.htm>, accessed in 03.04.2023

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem, p. 19

<sup>51</sup> Ibidem, p. 23

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, p. 27

principle of guaranteeing the autonomy for the units which compose the state. This system can be found in Belgium, Germany, Austria (or outside the EU good examples in this meaning are Switzerland and the USA)<sup>53</sup>.

Based on the presented classification, we consider that Romania falls into the second the second category, regionalization through local public administrations. Development regions in Romania are not administrative-territorial units and do not have legal personality, but some administrative functions are taken over by local administrations through decentralization and there are two institutions with attributions at the regional level (the Council for Regional Development and the Regional Development Agency).

Related to these types of regionalization we can mention the fact that, in general, a certain region shifts from one form to another as it acquires new powers from administrative, legislative, and financial point of view. Due to the specifics of each unit, within of the same state there may be regions that are at different stages of the regionalization process<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, p. 35

<sup>54</sup> Gerard, Marcou, *La régionalisation en Europe*, Série politique régionale REGI 108 FR/rév. 1, 1999, p.36



## II.4. Levels of implementation of development policies and strategies

Development policies and strategies are implemented on several levels. Below we present a general picture about these levels.

**The global level** – this is the action area of some international bodies (UN, UNDP, NATO), of states with great economic-military power (EU, USA, Russia, China, etc.) or of some international economic bodies (OPEC, OECD, etc.). The stake of the interventions at this level is the construction and implementation of trade agreements but also the development and implementation of global socio-economic development programs.

**Transnational level** (macro-regions) – development programs which cover broad regions, several countries or even continents; in the case of Romania such areas of cooperation that are the subject of separate policies are the region of the Black Sea and the region of the Balkan countries.

**Level of bilateral relations** between countries – creation of cooperation strategies between the two countries in order to facilitate mutual socio-economic development processes; most often these strategies take the form of treaties and cooperation agreements.

**National level** – the development and implementation of national policies and strategies, socio-economic development; are under the responsibility of the government and a the legislative.

**Regional level** – the development and implementation of regional policies and strategies, for socio-economic development

**County (or district) level** – the development and implementation of policies and county strategies for socio-economic development

**Local level** – the development and implementation of local policies and strategies for socio-economic development

**Organizational level** – programs aimed for the development of competencies and organizational efficiency; it usually targets public and private organizations existing on the area of a locality. Similar programs can be developed at previous levels of intervention.

**Individual level** – programs aimed for the development and realization of capacities and human potential; are addressed to individuals and have, as a rule, a limited area of covering.

About three decades ago, the regional dimension began to be more and more in focus for the planning and implementation of socio-economic development policies. Through this paradigm we

are witnessing the formation of a new concept, the concept of "new regionalism" as a revival of the idea of regional administration and regional development of well-being.

There are several arguments which are supporting this trend, below we list some of these:

- a. the national (centralized) level of planning proved to be too bureaucratic and ineffective to take into account the local and regional specifics.
- b. local level strategies and implementation of development policies are too small and difficult to use, especially in the case of relatively small communities. The regional level thus appears as the optimal solution that avoids both the exaggerated localism and the unacceptable generalization of national policies.
- c. regions have always been a reality of national states. Nation states were always formed by regions that did not lose their identity and did not merge into the nation state. Regions have always existed, even before nation states.
- d. the appearance of studies and researches that demonstrated how important it is the regional dimension both in influencing local processes and influencing national processes. It is worth mentioning here the work of Robert Putnam, „How Democracies work?" in which he makes a special analysis of the role and importance of regions<sup>55</sup>.
- e. preference of international bodies for the regional dimension. If our case is about the European Union's preference for the interventions at regional level. In fact, since the beginning of the EU construction, one of the perspectives which animated this process was the unification of the member states in a federative structure in which the national borders are erased and replaced by a series of new regional borders.

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<sup>55</sup> Putnam, D. Robert, *Cum functioneaza Democratia?*, ed Polirom, 2001, p .83-91



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## **Chapter III**

# **NEW FORMS OF TERRITORIAL AND TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION IN THE AREA OF THE WESTERN BALKANS**

### **III. 1 Introduction & methodology**

The main conflicts of the twentieth century occurred mainly because of political and ideological reasons. The borders of states became real insurmountable barriers not only for enemies, but several times also for their own citizens. This character of the borders created rather the role of elements that prevented the emergence of common activities and values. Although from a strategic point of view, strictly from the perspective of border regions, they were directly interested in developing a strategy based on cooperation with neighboring regions. Nevertheless, the specificity of Europe is given not only by the diversity of cultural and historical realities, but also by the existence of numerous borders between states.

The creation of today's status quo from the European continent is the result of a long and complex process. Over the years, this process has been influenced by numerous historical, political, economic and social factors. The understanding and good management of borders and neighborhood relations had a key role in the European construction process. The expansion of the European community has gradually changed the situation of the external borders of the EU. These changes produced socio-economic and political transformations that generated many opportunities in the field of regional development, but also created many potential problems and tensions. The new conjuncture created in an expanded Europe emphasizes the need for long-term commitments to support local and regional cross-border cooperation initiatives.

The issue of territorial and transnational cooperation in general goes beyond geographical, economic and legal approaches. If we intend to treat the phenomenon from a specific point of view, we will find ambiguities and uncertainties regarding the role of states and the functioning of some institutions in the process of territorial and transnational cooperation and partnerships.

Strong identity cleavages, which culminated in violent inter-ethnic conflicts, have profoundly marked Balkan societies. The new geopolitical realities, associated with a process of national-identity emancipation, have led to the redrawing of political maps in the Balkan space. Competition and mutual distrust marked the first two decades after the fall of communism. Slowly, these societies



matured and the injuries of the past began to heal. Even though there are still many open wounds, a reconciliation process has begun at the level of public discourse, at the political level and even at the level of identity. This dialogue, nevertheless, is not obvious everywhere and by no means is it irreversible. Proof of this are the complicated realities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia's disputes with Kosovo<sup>56</sup>.

The process of European integration seemed to be the solution in the context of widespread aspirations of the populations of these states towards EU accession. However, the process of European integration is not a simple one and requires, in addition to the EU's openness to make this integration (the numerous internal crises of the EU in the last decade, but also the need for institutional reform have slowed down or stopped the enlargement process) an integrating realignment of all identity communities within these states. Even if in the past years the process was promising, the actual situation shows that this is a highly contested and unfinished project<sup>57</sup>. The European Union always proclaims the idea of an open door for the Western Balkans, but at almost all times adjoined by “not yet”. This indecision has led to deception at both the political and societal levels<sup>58</sup>.

Some states seem resigned in this continuous antechamber. Some, like Serbia, are looking to find geopolitical alternatives to justify their policy. Thus, the Balkan space has once again become the theatre of complicated geopolitical realities involving first-rate global actors. The European Union, the U.S.A., the Russian Federation and China are developing a competition here, rather than a collaboration for smoothing out old identity conflicts. In this context, several new regional cooperation initiatives appear. These type of initiatives promises even more ambitions of some political leaders, but also provokes the opposition of some states in the region.

Methodologically, the emphasis of our analysis primarily falls on the legitimacy of this type of regional cooperation initiatives. In this regard, we use the pro and counter arguments of the states that support new initiatives but also the ones that challenge it. Last but not least, special attention is paid to the EU's perspective, in the context of its official position through the Berlin Process.

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<sup>56</sup> Mircea Brie, Islam Jusufi, Polgár István, *Is Inclusivity Necessary for Legitimacy of New Regionalism? Unpacking Open Balkan Initiative Negotiations*, in *Transylvanian Review*, Vol. XXIX, Supplement No. 2, Regional and Ethnic Communities, Past and Present, 2023, p. 185-209

<sup>57</sup> Mircea Brie; Islam Jusufi and Polgar Istvan, *The role of the Albanian Community in the European Integration Process of North Macedonia*, in Laura Herta and Adrian Corpodean (eds.), *International Relations and Area Studies: Focus on Western Balkans*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2021, p. 65.

<sup>58</sup> Adrian Corpădean, Laura M. Herta, *The Dangers of Halting Enlargement prospects in the Western Balkans*, in Stosunki Międzynarodowe/International Relations, 3/2019 vol 55, ISSN 0209-0961, p. 7-9

The purpose of this research is to analyse the unfolding of the negotiations regarding the operationalization of new regional cooperation initiatives. The paper proposes the following objectives:

- Carrying out a conceptual analysis, with concrete references to the realities of the Western Balkans, regarding new forms of cooperation and regionalism
- Identifying the role of the deadlock over the uncertain prospects of EU accession for the emergence of new cooperation initiatives
- Analysis of the pro and counter arguments within the new regional cooperation initiatives

The main question is configured around the phenomena of transnational and regional cooperation: Is there any tendency towards new regionalism in the Balkan space? The other research question is: Does the new cooperation models represent another step towards European integration?

### **III. 2 Context, historical elements and background to regional cooperation**

The fall of communism and the disintegration of Yugoslavia have amplified the process of national emancipation and the emergence of new cleavages in the Balkans. Against the background of conflicts and the desire for socio-economic development, the societies of the new Balkan states have repositioned themselves in favor of a reconciling dialogue<sup>59</sup>. History has taught the Western Balkan nations to be suspicious, especially of their neighbours. Some of that suspicion has re-emerged recently considering the tensions on the Serbian and Kosovar border which are blocking the EU membership talks. The EU, with some exceptions, has fallen silent on the case several border incidents.<sup>60</sup> In the absence of the EU membership, the countries of the region are asked to do more for their own reforms in their own. This for the countries of the region has meant that they will need to wrap up their problems by their own. However, it is impossible for the countries of the region so much dependent on the outside world experiencing constant crises with neighbouring states to sustain their internal economic and political stabilities. Thus, the emerging foreign policy context and culture can be characterized as Hobbesian, which has a deep mistrust of the international system and relies

<sup>59</sup> Mircea Brie; Islam Jusufi and Polgar Istvan, *The role of the Albanian Community in the European Integration Process of North Macedonia*, in Laura Herta and Adrian Corpodean (eds.), *International Relations and Area Studies: Focus on Western Balkans*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2021, p. 65.

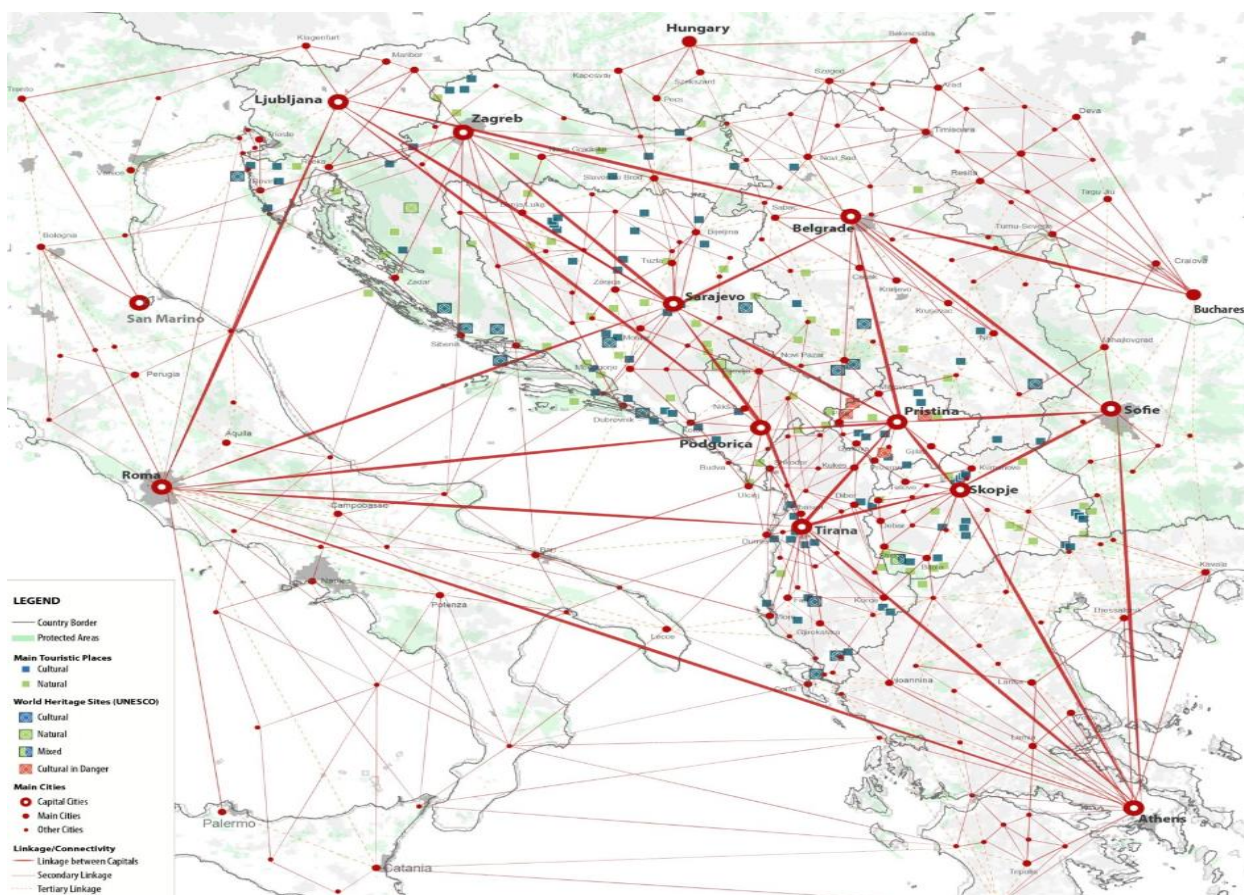
<sup>60</sup> Atanasov, Goce. “Дозеф: Недозволива толеранција на ЕУ за бугарската блокада на Македонија” [Joseph: Inadmissible EU tolerance for the Bulgarian blockade of Macedonia]. *Slobodna Evropa*, January 5, 2022.



on self-help for solving problems<sup>61</sup>.

Still, the countries of the Western Balkan region: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia share a common objective, to be part of the EU. This commonly shared goal is valid and represents the future despite the huge diversity which characterize the Balkan space.

**Map. 1 Regional Cooperation – WB Visioning Territorial Futures in the context of the EU**



Source: Regional Studies Association, *The Western Balkan Network on Territorial Governance – a regional initiative for cooperation*, <https://www.regionalstudies.org/news/blog-the-western-balkan-network-on-territorial-governance-a-regional-initiative-for-cooperation/>, accessed in 19.04.23

<sup>61</sup> Laura M. Herta, Adrian G. Corpădean, *The social construction of identity and belonging. Perceptions fo EU in the Western Balkans*, in Anna Skolimowska (ed.) *Perceptions of the European Union's identity in the International Relations*, London: Routledge, 2019, p. 42-88

### III.2.1 The idea of regional cooperation and new regionalism

The idea of regional cooperation or regionalism, seen as policy cooperation in different areas among geographically proximate neighbours,<sup>62</sup> has been a main tendency in the foreign policies of the countries, particularly in Europe, starting from early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The initial ideas of regionalism were concerned with the ambition of achieving coherence among the countries within a specific region, as is the establishment of the European Communities in the 1950s. In this initial phase, the concept of regionalism also featured aspects of regional fragmentation and competition, arising in particular as a result of the rivalry between the West and East in the Cold War circumstances.<sup>63</sup>

With the end of the Cold War, the idea of regionalism gave way to what became known as New Regionalism. The end of the bipolarity fostered a more decentralized international system with the countries and the regions increasingly enjoying more freedoms in their foreign policy choices. Thus, the New Regionalism has seen regionalization in the direction of the establishment of the multipolar world,<sup>64</sup> as a source for achievement of Regionness<sup>65</sup> with the capacity of a region to articulate its interests through relevant institutions.<sup>66</sup>

The above external explanations of regional cooperation are particularly important in cases of conflictual or post-conflict, developing and aid dependent societies like the Western Balkans.<sup>67</sup> These external sources are not necessarily the only factors, however. It is also possible that the regional relations are derived from the internal economic and political dynamics of a region or of a country. In reality, the intra-regional factors probably interact and thus shape each other. All regions have their characteristic paths of economic and political development that impact on intra-regional politics. Regionalism can be also market-driven for instance as a reaction against challenges imposed by globalization either to protect against the competitive pressures or to benefit from them.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Bozhilova, Diana. *Energy security and regional cooperation in South-East Europe*, in *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 11, no. 3, 2009, p. 293-311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448950903152151>

<sup>63</sup> Gunnarsson, Malin. *Regionalism and Security - Two concepts in the Wind of Change*, in *Nuclear Risks, Environmental, and Development Co-operation in the North of Europe*, edited by P. Axensten & G. Weissglas. CERUM, 2000.

<sup>64</sup> Idem

<sup>65</sup> Björn, Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum, *Theorising the Rise of Regionness*, in *New Political Economy*, Vol.5, No. 3, 2000, p. 457-472

<sup>66</sup> Björn, Hettne and Fredrik Söderbaum. *The New Regionalism Approach*, in *Politeia* 17, no. 3, 1998, p. 6-21.

<sup>67</sup> Anastasakis, Othon, and Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic. *Balkan Regional Cooperation & European Integration*, London: The Hellenic Observatory, The European Institute, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2002.

<sup>68</sup> Mittelman, James H. *Rethinking the New Regionalism in the Context of Globalization*, in *Global Governance* 2, no. 2, 1996, p. 189-213. <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-002-02-90000004>



Regionalism has been further encouraged by the democratization and new attitudes towards international cooperation in which absolute rather than relative gains have come to dominate.<sup>69</sup> In addition, authoritarian leaders can exploit regionalism to boost their domestic regimes<sup>70</sup>. Thus, the New Regionalism<sup>71</sup> features a diverse and multi-dimensional cooperation as it has come to involve many actors, including both state and non-state actors, cooperation is exercised in the fields of both high and low politics<sup>72</sup> and with both external and internal incentives in play that have kept the regional cooperation alive<sup>73</sup>.

The regional cooperation initiatives, deriving from Neo-Realism explanation that considers regions to be defined by the physical boundaries of their members, are heavily defined by relative material power of the member states and their respective national interests<sup>74</sup>. In this way, the regional cooperation boils down to a movement between the desire for domination<sup>75</sup>, on the one hand, and of emancipation in the struggle for core and peripheral positions, on the other.<sup>76</sup> In these circumstances, tensions occur between large and small member states that both may try to augment regional cooperation to strengthen their economic and political positions respectively<sup>77</sup>. Their struggle is for relative gains and regional cooperation is pursued to establish a regional industrial base, enhance

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Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde. *Security. A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998.

<sup>69</sup> Rosecrance, Richard. *Regionalism and the Post-Cold War Era*, in *International Journal* 46, no. 2, 1991, p. 373-93. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F002070209104600301>

<sup>70</sup> Debre, Maria J. *The dark side of regionalism: how regional organizations help authoritarian regimes to boost survival*, in *Democratization* 28, no. 2, 2021, p. 394-413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1823970>

<sup>71</sup> Kneuer, Marianne, Thomas Demmelhuber, Raphael Peresson, and Tobias Zumbrägel. *Playing the Regional Card: Why and How Authoritarian Gravity Centres Exploit Regional Organisations*, in *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 3, 2018, p. 451-470. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1474713>

<sup>72</sup> Anastasakis and Bojicic-Dzelilovic, *Balkan Regional Cooperation*; Kut, Şule, and N. Asli Şirin. *The bright side of Balkan politics: Cooperation in the Balkans*, in *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 2, no. 1, 2002, p. 10-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683850208454669>

<sup>73</sup> Libman, Alexander, and Anastassia V Obydenkova. *Understanding Authoritarian Regionalism*, in *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 4, 2018, p. 151-165. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0070>;

<sup>74</sup> Russo, Alessandra & Edward Stoddard. *Why Do Authoritarian Leaders Do Regionalism? Ontological Security and Eurasian Regional Cooperation.* *The International Spectator*, in *Italian Journal of International Affairs*, 53(3), 2018, p. 20-37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2018.1488404>;

<sup>75</sup> Stoddard, Edward, *Authoritarian Regimes in Democratic Regional Organisations? Exploring Regional Dimensions of Authoritarianism in an Increasingly Democratic West Africa*, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 35, no. 4, 2017, p. 469-486. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2017.1347254>;

<sup>76</sup> Väyrynen, Raimo. *Post-Hegemonic and Post-Socialist Regionalism: A Comparison of East Asia and Central Europe*, in *The Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame - Occasional Paper*, no. 13, 1997

<sup>77</sup> Ambrosio, Thomas. *Catching the Shanghai Spirit: How the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Promotes Authoritarian Norms in Central Asia*, in *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, no. 8, 2008, p. 1321-1344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130802292143>;



bargaining power, lock in domestic political reforms, or avoid national isolation.<sup>78</sup> There are also critical political attitudes towards regionalism in play that are also often shaped by the negative historical experiences.<sup>79</sup>

### **III.3 The history and practice of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans**

The main area of EU involvement in the Western Balkans happened at the beginning of the 90s and it had a humanitarian nature. The EU adopted a regional approach towards Southeastern European countries, whereby the main aim was to achieve basic stability and prosperity for the region as a whole<sup>80</sup>. At that time, the region had been witnessing a chain of violent interethnic conflicts, so stability was obviously the minimum condition for further cooperation with the EU. One of the first European initiatives to stabilize SEE was launched in 1996, called the Royaumont Process, its aim was to support the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreements and to promote regional projects in the field of civil society, culture and human rights<sup>81</sup>.

Later, the EU encouraged reforms in the region which were meant to serve as pre-conditions for accession into the EU<sup>82</sup>. It became clear that the countries from the region needed to establish bilateral and multilateral relationships among themselves, and therefore the EU attempted to launch “a regional multilateral tool”. This tool was The Stability Pact. Launched in 1999, the Stability Pact was an initiative that drew together the EU and some other partner states with the aim of bringing peace, stability and economic development to the Balkans.

The backbone of the EU’s strategy towards the Western Balkans after the post Kosovo crisis was the introduction of the Stabilization and Association process. This process promotes stability within the region and facilitates a closer association of the Western Balkan countries with the EU, and ultimately assists countries in their preparation for EU membership<sup>83</sup>.

<sup>78</sup> Shiells, Clinton, *Regional Trade Blocs: Trade Creating or Diverting*, in *Finance and Development* 32, no. 1, 1995, p. 30-31.

<sup>79</sup> Duus, Peter. *Remembering the Empire: Postwar Interpretations of the Greater East Asia Coprosperity Sphere* in *The Woodrow Wilson Center, Asia Program - Occasional Paper*, no. 54, 1993

<sup>80</sup> Collins, Kathleen, *Economic and Security Regionalism among Patrimonial Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of Central Asia*, in *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 2, 2009, p. 249-281. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130802630854>

<sup>81</sup> Antonija Petričušić, *Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans – A key to Integration into the European Union*, Institute for International Relations, Zagreb, 2005, p. 4-6

<sup>82</sup> Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic, Othon Anastasakis, *Balkan Regional Cooperation and European Integration*, The Hellenic Observatory, LSE, London, 2002, p. 5-7

<sup>83</sup> Antonija Petričušić, *Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans – A key to Integration into the European Union*, Institute for International Relations, Zagreb, 2005, p. 4-6



In 2000, a new EU financial instrument, the Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization strategy was set up. The initiative represented a financial instrument used to manage EU assistance by the WB countries<sup>84</sup>.

The New Regionalism has been emerging pattern all around the world, but it has been in particular evident and dominant in Europe, where existing regional cooperation institutions such as the European Communities/European Union, NATO and the CSCE/OSCE were strengthened and new regional and sub-regional arrangements emerged in various parts of Europe,<sup>85</sup> including in the Balkans, the southeast corner of the European continent. The Western Balkans, a geo-political term coined starting from early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is a sub-region that refers to the six Balkan countries located in the western side of the Balkan peninsula that have not yet been able to achieve membership in the European Union. These include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.<sup>86</sup>

The Western Balkans has had interesting features as regards the regional cooperation. In thirty years since the end of the Cold War, this region has seen changes in its name from Balkans to South East Europe to Western Balkans for re-branding purposes.<sup>87</sup> It has not been a permanent fixture; its political-territorial shape has changed, and has moved from one zone of economic and political development to another. Its shape has been dynamic, with constant reproduction<sup>88</sup>. The intra-regional economic integration has been limited. The trade and economic relations among the countries of the region is very minimal. For all countries of the region, trade with the EU is far more significant.<sup>89</sup> Thus, the Western Balkans is an emerging region rather than full-fledged regional arrangement as it has not yet fully developed its economic and political potential<sup>90</sup>. However, increasingly, this region

<sup>84</sup> Ibidem, 7

<sup>85</sup> Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic, Othon Anastasakis, *Balkan Regional Cooperation and European Integration*, The Hellenic Observatory, LSE, London, 2002, p.11-15

<sup>86</sup> Mircea Brie, Islam Jusufi, Polgár István, *Is Inclusivity Necessary for Legitimacy of New Regionalism? Unpacking Open Balkan Initiative Negotiations in Transylvanian Review*, Vol. XXIX, Supplement No. 2, Regional and Ethnic Communities, Past and Present, 2023, p. 187-188

<sup>87</sup> Andreev, Svetlozar A. *Sub-regional cooperation and the expanding EU: the Balkans and the Black Sea area in a comparative perspective*, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 11, no. 1, 2009, p. 83-106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448950902724489>

<sup>88</sup> Bechev, Dimitar. *Contested borders, contested identity: the case of regionalism in Southeast Europe*, in *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 4, no. 1, 2004, p. 77–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683850412331321728>

<sup>89</sup> Seroka, Jim. *Issues with regional reintegration of the Western Balkans*, in *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans* 10, no. 1, 2008, p. 15-29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613190801895912>

<sup>90</sup> Favaretto, Tito, *Paving the Way for Possible Balkan Regional Cooperation*, in *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs* 35, no. 1, 2000, p. 73-82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932720008458115>

has faced the new challenges in the direction of marketisation and democratisation, and there are emerging regional preferences<sup>91</sup>.

A question arises on whether Western Balkans region has a centre either within itself or outside the region. Responses to this question reveal whether this region has autonomy in relation to major powers and core economies or not.<sup>92</sup> The conventional wisdom says that this region's economies and polities are in transition to dependence on the EU. The alternative vision however, formulated by the founders of Open Balkan initiative, which is the case of this study, suggests that, while external orientation to the EU remains a dominant trend, but in the absence of the EU membership, there is a place for an alternative vision, which searches for regional self-organisation and limited dependence to outside the world<sup>93</sup>.

For more than 30 years since the end of the Cold War and disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991, the region of Western Balkans has witnessed series of external and internal efforts to foster the regional cooperation. There is no major regional initiative that has been inherited from communist times. All the existing and functional regional cooperation initiatives are established in the post-Cold War era, and with few exceptions, have mainly been initiated with the assistance of the actors external to the region, including the EU, NATO and the US. The dominant international actors engaged in the region have been experimenting with alternative regional strategies and approaches which have not always been consistent and have had limited or unsuccessful results.<sup>94</sup> While the initiatives that concern the wider region of Balkans or of South East Europe include many and have longer history, such as the Regional Cooperation Council or the South East Europe Cooperation Process, the initiatives that are limited to the six Western Balkan countries are only recently established and they include the initiatives such as the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, Open Balkan, the Western Balkans Fund and few others.

Due to historical differences, the legacy of Yugoslav wars of 1990s and the ethnic cleavages, the region does not fulfil qualifications for a Security Community where there is a shared sense of belonging combined with development of common political and foreign policy practices and

<sup>91</sup> Pippidi, Andrei, *Changes of Emphases: Greek Christendom, Westernization, South-Eastern Europe, and Neo-Mittleuropa*, in *Balkanologie* 3, no. 2 (1999): 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.4000/balkanologie.747>

<sup>92</sup> Väyrynen, *Post-Hegemonic and Post-Socialist Regionalism*

<sup>93</sup> Tsoukalis, Loukas, *Economic aspects of European and Balkan regional integration*, in *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs* 34, no. 4 (1999): 41-48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729908456887>

<sup>94</sup> Anastasakis and Bojicic-Dzelilovic, *Balkan Regional Cooperation*.



behaviour.<sup>95</sup> National identities in the Western Balkans have been defined and have operated in opposition to each other.<sup>96</sup> The disintegration process still continues in the region. The definition of borders is still unclear. All in all, the region of the Western Balkans is diversified and composed by a variety of countries and governmental authorities. Such a regional context limits the capacity of its actors to define regional objectives and pursue regional cooperation. There has been also limited economic ability to initiate and sustain regional initiatives. Something is clear and that is the countries of the region have not been able to deal with the trans-border threats without the support of the external factors such as the EU, NATO and the US. Nevertheless, there is wide conviction that the issues and problems - economic, political and security - in the Western Balkans cannot be resolved on a national basis alone. They are regional in character and therefore require additional regional measures.<sup>97</sup>

Despite the fact that it is not yet a Security Community, the idea of genuine regional cooperation stems from the fact that regional cooperation is a relations-related matter. Inter-state relations are about how states relate to each other not only in terms of common objectives, but also in terms of dangers and risks. The Western Balkans is enmeshed in a web of interdependence in terms of problems and desires. In the Western Balkans we have indivisibility situation, where a set of states have major problems so interlinked that these problems cannot reasonably be resolved apart from one another. Aware of this situation, the commitment for regional cooperation has been dominant feature of the foreign policies of the countries of the region. It is seen as important point in the entire process of the European integration, as the source for stability, security, democracy and prosperity, and as an important confidence building measure among the countries.<sup>98</sup> The snowball effects of regional cooperation coming from the northern Europe also have enhanced the agenda for regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. The benefits seen by countries of Central Europe from initiatives such as Visegrad Group or Central European Free Trade Agreement have encouraged the countries of the

<sup>95</sup> Vucetic, Srdjan, *The Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe as a Security Community-Building Institution*, in *Southeast European Politics* 2, no. 2, 2001, p. 109-134;

<sup>96</sup> Todorova, Maria. *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory*. NY: NYU Press, 2004; Bechev, "Contested borders, contested identity"; Kitromilides, Paschalis M. "Balkan Mentality: History, Legend, Imagination." *Nations and Nationalism* 2, no. 2, 1996, p. 163-191. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1354-5078.1996.00163.x>.

<sup>97</sup> Anastasakis and Bojicic-Dzelilovic, *Balkan Regional Cooperation*.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibidem*.

region to follow the suit.<sup>99</sup> The countries thus have started to demonstrate a considerable readiness to pledge and commit substantial effort for regional cooperation. The Regional Youth Cooperation Office, Open Balkan and the Western Balkans Fund are results of this emerging trend<sup>100</sup>.

Our study has focused on assessing the two major regional cooperation initiatives from the past decade, formed and proposed by states from the Western Balkans or by external actors. Some of these initiatives become an issue around which major recent discussions have been held on the regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. Two issues have mainly guided these discussions. First, discussions focused on the assumption that this type of cooperation initiatives were initiated because of the impasse in the EU membership prospects for the countries of the Western Balkans. Second concern is focusing on the legitimacy of the cooperation proposals, since not all six countries of the region are part in certain proposals.

### III.3.1 The need for new regional cooperation initiatives

The region of the Western Balkans, despite the fact that it is a major sub-region of Europe and is surrounded by EU member states, has remained out of EU borders. The European integration process has moved, but very slowly. More than twenty years have passed since the EU made the promise for their membership in 1999. At the time of writing this study, two of the six countries hold accession talks (Montenegro, Serbia), two others are candidate states (Albania, North Macedonia) and remaining two have not yet achieved a candidacy status (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo)<sup>101</sup>. A region where the EU defined its foreign and security policy in post-Cold War era has remained a grey area at the heart of Europe<sup>102</sup>. Culprits can be found both in EU and in the region. The process has recently been burdened with the persistence of old disputes, but also with the emergence of new quarrels.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Dangerfield, Martin, *Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans: Stabilisation device or integration policy?* in *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 5, no. 2 (2004): 203-241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15705850408438886>.

<sup>100</sup> Mircea Brie, Islam Jusufi, Polgár István, *Is Inclusivity Necessary for Legitimacy of New Regionalism? Unpacking Open Balkan Initiative Negotiations*, in *Transylvanian Review*, Vol. XXIX, Supplement No. 2, Regional and Ethnic Communities, Past and Present, 2023, p. 189

<sup>101</sup> Mircea Brie, Islam Jusufi, Polgár István, *Is Inclusivity Necessary for Legitimacy of New Regionalism? Unpacking Open Balkan Initiative Negotiations*, in *Transylvanian Review*, Vol. XXIX, Supplement No. 2, Regional and Ethnic Communities, Past and Present, 2023, p. 189-190

<sup>102</sup> Laura M. Herta, Adrian G. Corpădean, *Europeanisation in the Western Balkans. Challenges and Pitfalls* in Miriam Sette (ed.) *Critical Thinking in Critical Times*, London Center for Interdisciplinary Research, 2021, p.25-31

<sup>103</sup> Rizaov, Erol. “Заврши ли малтретирањето на Македонија” [Is the harassment of Macedonia over]. *DW – North Macedonia*, January 12, 2021.



The EU membership has been vital goal for the six Western Balkan states. The EU's condition-setting approach made a huge impact on the design of the democratisation reforms in the region. The EU also through its wider political, economic and security presence in the region provided incentive for the development of the European integration-oriented strategies. It also played a significant role in resolution of the political turmoil's happening constantly in these countries. However, the integration process of these countries fell into trap as they were exposed to be crisis management countries for the EU rather than as countries to which the EU should enlarge, which damaged their integration prospects. This legacy has continued to harm their European integration prospects. Once the countries are recipients of the EU crisis management, it is difficult to expect a change in the paradigm from a crisis to a member<sup>104</sup>.

Parallel to the absence of the EU membership prospects, the Western Balkans have experienced economic crisis that engulfed the region onwards. It has been already two years where the countries have experienced high financial crisis, with implications to investments, energy resources, remittances, industrial production, employment and growth. In these circumstances, the corruption as a phenomenon has leapt to the top of voters' concerns.<sup>105</sup> Overall the public is scared and uncertain. And the implications of the failures on the economic side, with the absence of the European integration leverage, have forced the region's governments to be more pragmatist and less value-driven.

The wider perception, in both the EU and the Western Balkans, is that the EU membership is difficult to happen in near future or in medium term.<sup>106</sup> And it may not happen at all, considering the offer made by the EU leaders to Western Balkans to join the European Economic Area rather than the EU, an offer which has been rejected by the Western Balkan leaders.<sup>107</sup> Absence of EU membership progress in both the reality and in the perceptions of the public has decreased the credibility and leverage of the EU in the region, laying the basis for criticism of the EU role and for

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>105</sup> 360 stepeni. "Истражување на МЦМС: Корупцијата е на прво место на листата на најголеми проблеми на граѓаните" [MCIC Survey: Corruption is at the top of the list of the biggest problems of the citizens]. 360 stepeni, December 8, 2021.

<sup>106</sup> Stratulat, Corina, Marko Kmezić, Nikolaos Tzifakis, Matteo Bonomi, and Zoran Nechev. *Public opinion and the EU integration in the Western Balkans*. BiEPAG, 2020.

<sup>107</sup> DW – North Macedonia. "Пендаровски: Европската економска зона не може да биде замена за членството во ЕУ" [Pendarovski: The European Economic Zone cannot be a substitute for EU membership]. DW – North Macedonia, January 15, 2021.

emergence of alternative thinking in the minds of the Western Balkan leaders. For most of the leaders of the Western Balkan space, the intra-regional economic integration can be considered as a substitute to the absence of the European integration.<sup>108</sup>

### III.3.2 The Berlin process as a new regional approach

Nowadays the six Western Balkan countries, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia in terms of international relations and cooperation policies are having the same objective. This objective is called European Union and the integration to it. This process is long and complicated, since these countries still face divisions, both infrastructural and political, and are confronted, among other things, by a difficult economic situation, permanent bilateral disputes and instability<sup>109</sup>.

The Berlin process was set up in 2014 as a platform for high-level cooperation between high official representatives of the Western Balkan Six and their peers in Berlin Process host countries. The Process also involves the EU institutions, international financial institutions and the region's civil society, youth and businesses. The Berlin Process was initiated to utilize the potential of increased regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. The idea was to foster specific projects in order to increase connectivity in the region, as well as good neighborly relations and interpersonal relationships, while subsequently supporting the EU integration. This initiative is not a part of the EU's Stabilization and Accession Process, but supplements as an independent format which is also focusing on the region as a whole<sup>110</sup>.

The main plan of the initiative was to focus on issues of economic and regional cooperation. In organizational terms, it consists of a series of meetings at which representatives of individual EU member states, EU institutions, and international financial institutions meet with governments as well as local civil society representatives from the Western Balkans. The cooperation format develops recommendations and strategies for the adoption of new regional ties and the implementation

<sup>108</sup> Semini, Llazar, *3 Western Balkan countries deepen economic ties at summit*, in *Associate Press*, December 21, 2021; *Lapsi*. "Rama i kërkon pazar BE: S'po na integroni, por mbështesni Ballkanin e Hapur" [*Rama bargains with the EU: You are not integrating us, then support the Open Balkan*]. *Lapsi*, October 6, 2021.

<sup>109</sup> European Parliament, *The Western Balkans Berlin Process. A new impulse for regional cooperation*, available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS\\_BRI\(2016\)586602](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2016)586602) accessed in 12.04.23

<sup>110</sup> Deutsche Zusammenarbeit, *Western Balkan Summit 2022*, <https://www.berlinprocess.de/en/the-berlin-process-since-2015>, accessed in 21.04.23



of already established strategies and agreements. It also focuses on opportunities to allow Western Balkans to benefit on short term by the European context, financial frame and partnership, even without being part of the EU. These characteristics give the specific of the initiative, which keeps as a central point economic issues and regional cooperation, because within the EU, the prevailing view is that economic cooperation can stabilize the region and bring it closer to the EU's internal market<sup>111</sup>. The principle fields on which the initiative should generate development are focusing on:

- resolution of outstanding bilateral and internal issues
- achieving reconciliation within and between the societies in the region
- enhancing regional economic cooperation
- laying the foundations for sustainable growth

With nine years after its launch, the Berlin Process has already produced many ambitious ideas, such as the common regional market. The implementation of these plans and agreements by the Western Balkan states has often stopped and stagnated. Even though to strengthen cooperation between the states of the region and with the EU has become even more important in light of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

There are several reasons because the initiative scores low. In the following we will try to list some of the main reasons of the stagnation.

One of the main issues regarding the Berlin Process concerns the socio-economic development and the regional cooperation, which do not explicitly go hand in hand with the EU integration process of the Western Balkans. The very poor infrastructure, the lack of public investment, in sewage systems, waste disposal or energy production, high poverty and social inequality in the region are not supported by the Berlin Process, making it inefficient.

The second issue because of which the initiative fails to achieve more progress is the fact that WB states perceived the initiative as a substitute for EU enlargement and integration. Even if no member state neither the EU announced it as an alternative for the integration, the timing was very bad and support the scepticism within the WB countries. The Berlin Process was launched exactly after the suspension of EU enlargement<sup>112</sup>.

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<sup>111</sup> Marina Vulović, *The Berlin Process in the Western Balkans: Big Ideas, Difficult Implementation*, SWP Comment, No. 70, 2022, p. 2-3

<sup>112</sup> Branimir Jovanović, Mario Holzner, *The Berlin Process for the Western Balkans: Four Recommendations to Achieve Progress*, The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, 2023, p. 2-3

The third reason can be explained by the fact that the initiative was perceived from the beginning as a strategy or plan given by foreign actors after a very low level of consultation with the WB countries. Even the name of the initiative is meaningful, raising the believe of the general public that all the initiative is a paternalistic project dominated from abroad, in which local actors simply follow the instructions<sup>113</sup>.

The fourth issue concerns the local political willingness towards the initiative. This also scores low. Local political leaders' involvement in the design and implementation of the initiative was very low. These have very limited tools and instruments to interfere or to promote the initiative. This happens especially because the Berlin Process is primarily focusing on macro level regional cooperation, not on small local economies with a weak growth potential<sup>114</sup>.

For many of the European member states, and especially for Germany, as the initiator, the Berlin Process still represents a priority. At a political declaration level, the Berlin Process is still accepted as the centrepiece for WB integration<sup>115</sup>. Any regional cooperation is beneficial especially which has an inclusive character and its open to all six countries in the region. Therefore, many European member states will continue to strongly support the Action Plan of the Common Regional Market. On the other hand, the political leaders of the six Western Balkan countries reaffirmed the commitment to this historic project at the last Summit of the Berlin Process.

The EU's position regarding the Berlin Process is not different. The EU publicly welcome the initiative, to strengthen regional cooperation, in some of the most important elements in the European perspective of the Western Balkans and an integral part of the stabilization and association process. In this regard, it is important for the countries to be able to move forward and create a common regional market, a commitment undertaken by all 6 Balkan leaders. This can help the acceleration of cohesion and convergence in these countries and it would contribute to speed up the negotiation process.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Idem

<sup>114</sup> Idem

<sup>115</sup> European Western Balkans, *Relationship between Berlin Process and Open Balkan* discussed during Merkel's Tirana visit." *European Western Balkans*, September 15, 2021.

<sup>116</sup> *Politiko*. "EC spokeswoman: We encourage all 6 Balkan leaders, accelerates integration." *Politiko*, August 14, 2021.

### III.3.3 The Open Balkans Initiative as a new regional approach.

The countries of the Western Balkans have been burdened by numerous disagreements and open conflicts that have been a fundamental feature of their relations after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. After the armed conflicts that followed the initial proclamation of independence in several of the Balkan countries, a period of consolidation came, along with European integration as well as cooperation and reconciliation efforts<sup>117</sup>.

The Balkans as a whole, and its western part in particular, is an area of marked ethnic and religious diversity. As a result of this ethno-religious mosaic, the Western Balkans is arguably the most politically-territorially fragmented part of Europe. The gradual resolution of these conflicts has relieved the public sphere from excessive ethnic nationalistic discussions, which has been conducive to the emergence of civic identities and, with the further rapprochement to Europe, offering the prospect of European non-ethnic identities<sup>118</sup>. However, all these countries publicly express their commitment to the European perspective, which they see as an opportunity to solve both internal and external problems. On the other hand, the EU insists on good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation as one of the fundamental preconditions for joining this organization<sup>119</sup>.

In order to create an EU-like integrated market Western Balkan countries have to establish stronger political, economic, scientific, cultural, etc. and every other form of cooperation and act towards the EU as a group of countries with clearly defined requests and interests.

The main tool in this process, where we can see also great achievements are the bilateral and multilateral meetings organized by or with the support of the European Union and the US, where political leaders of the region gather and take common decisions that are valuable for the whole region<sup>120</sup>. Borderless ness would be very beneficial for the Western Balkans. It would represent an initiative that really helps citizens and the economy to recover and be more competitive. The Western Balkans are in great need of economic integration. This hypothesis represented of the main drivers in

<sup>117</sup> Mircea Brie, Islam Jusufi, Polgár István, *Is Inclusivity Necessary for Legitimacy of New Regionalism? Unpacking Open Balkan Initiative Negotiations*, in *Transylvanian Review*, Vol. XXIX, Supplement No. 2, Regional and Ethnic Communities, Past and Present, 2023, p. 185-209

<sup>118</sup> Mircea Brie; Islam Jusufi and Polgar Istvan, *op.cit.*, p. 65-68.

<sup>119</sup> Zuhail Karakoç Dora, Jurica Botić, *The Mini Schengen Initiative in the Western Balkans as a New Buffer Zone*, Ankara University SBF Dergisi, 2021, p. 9-10 available on Available from: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356700242\\_The\\_Mini\\_Schengen\\_Initiative\\_in\\_the\\_Western\\_Balkans\\_as\\_a\\_New\\_Buffer\\_Zone](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356700242_The_Mini_Schengen_Initiative_in_the_Western_Balkans_as_a_New_Buffer_Zone) accessed 15.04.2023.

<sup>120</sup> Lucia Vesnic Alujevic, *European Integration of Western Balkans: From Reconciliation To European Future*, 2012, Brussels, p. 6-9.



the negotiation process. This type of integration can make the region more attractive for the foreign capital. Nowadays we can witness that there is a very small level of foreign investments in the region.

There are numerous discussions on the position of the Western Balkans within the contemporary geopolitical image of the world and the economic dimensions of cooperation among the countries of the region. However, due to the recent formalization of the Open Balkan initiative, it is understandable that there are still no significant number of discussions on all dimensions of this initiative and the geopolitical and economic consequences of its emergence. This issue is of particular importance in the context of European border and security policy and its relations with the countries of the Western Balkans, as the Open Balkan initiative also implies a higher level of border openness between member states<sup>121</sup>.

So, the question is, the process of border opening in the region represents another step towards the European integration, or it shows that everyone is tired of the ups and downs of the European integration process and they want to replace it with something?

Tracking the history and milestones of the initiative we can observe that nowadays the situation of the European integration process of the Western Balkan countries is delayed and difficult. Despite the fact that several objectives were reached in the process of European integration we need to admit that in the Western Balkans there are still tensions and unsolved issues between countries of the region<sup>122</sup>.

On the other hand, EU's internal issues, including migration crisis and lack of interest in enlargement prompted the leaders of the Western Balkan countries to think ahead and seek optimal solutions to the complex situation. Recognizing the situation of the Balkan countries regarding the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, three leaders, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, Prime Minister of North Macedonia Zoran Zaev and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama decided in October 2019 to initialize a new form of cooperation in the area and launched a visionary idea of establishing a "mini Schengen"<sup>123</sup>. At the end of July 2021, this idea evolved into a regional 'Open Balkan' initiative. The initiative is not a substitute for EU accession, but a way to accelerate accession and

<sup>121</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 11-12.

<sup>122</sup> Brie Mircea, Islam Jusufi, Polgar Istvan, *op.cit.*, p. 70-72.

<sup>123</sup> Dusan Ristic, *Open Balkan Initiative, Less History, More Business*, 2021 available at <https://cep.org.rs/en/blogs/open-balkan-initiative/>, accessed 15.04.2023.



harness existing but underutilized potential that will facilitate economic prosperity<sup>124</sup>.

At the Economic Forum on Regional Cooperation, held in Skopje on the 29<sup>th</sup> of July 2021, leaders of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia presented a new name for what was colloquially known as Mini-Schengen, which from now on, will be officially called the Open Balkan initiative. The three political leaders signed one interstate Agreement and two Memorandums of understanding, deepening political and economic ties between these countries<sup>125</sup>. According to the joint statement of the political leaders, released at the end of the Economic Forum on Regional Cooperation, the primary goal of the initiative is to make existing regional initiatives more effective in order to achieve practical and visible results for the Western Balkans citizens<sup>126</sup>. The initiative leads to the establishment of a Common Regional Market, which as a transition form, should bring the region closer to the European Union and accelerate the path to full membership.

Leaders of the Open Balkans regional cooperation initiative met also on 21 December 2021 in Tirana, Albania to sign several agreements that will facilitate the movement of people, goods, capital and services between the three countries, as well as trade operations. They signed an agreement on work permits that will allow workers from Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia to more easily obtain the necessary work permits and documents. The agreement on integrated electronic systems should allow citizens of the three countries to submit applications in other countries from any location. In addition, the four agreements related to veterinary and phytosanitary inspections, which were also signed, will facilitate trade in livestock as well as plant and animal products<sup>127</sup>.

A previous attempt for such a cooperation was made during the Berlin Process, a German-led cooperation initiative designed for the Western Balkan countries, which never culminated in a binding agreement. Seven years later, the region's countries are trying to prove they can do things on their own, with or without the EU's help. The initiative has been welcomed by both the European Union

<sup>124</sup> The International Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies (IFIMES), “2022 Open Balkan: One voice and an opportunity for all.” <https://www.ifimes.org/en/researches/2022-open-balkan-one-voice-and-an-opportunity-for-all/4978#>, accessed 11.04.2023

<sup>125</sup> Dusan Ristic, *Open Balkan Initiative, Less History, More Business*, 2021 available at <https://cep.org.rs/en/blogs/open-balkan-initiative/>, accessed 15.04.2023.

<sup>126</sup> Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, *Joint statement of the leaders of “Open Balkan”*, <https://vlada.mk/node/26063?ln=en-gb> accessed 12.04.23.

<sup>127</sup> The International Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies (IFIMES), “2022 Open Balkan: One voice and an opportunity for all.” <https://www.ifimes.org/en/researches/2022-open-balkan-one-voice-and-an-opportunity-for-all/4978#>, accessed 11.04.2023

and the United States. In the framework of this initiative, border controls between Serbia, Albania and northern Macedonia will end on 1 January 2023.

**Map 2.** Territorial illustration of the Open Balkan Initiative



Source: Aleksandar Brezar, *As Eu membership stalls, Balkan countries make controversial move to create their mini-Schengen*, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/08/31/as-eu-membership-stalls-balkan-countries-make-controversial-move-to-create-their-own-mini-schengen> accessed in 19.04.23

The initiative it would include all the countries of the Western Balkans, not just Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania, but also Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, but the latter were sceptical about the idea. Even though the objectives of the initiative can be considered bright and the initiative itself can represent a serious step in solving the still existing tensions and unsolved issues between countries of the region, most probably the shadows of the past and the current context have a negative impact over decision making in terms of new regional cooperation's.

If we want to make a brief summary, why the Open Balkan Initiative is not representing a solution as a regional cooperation tool, we can list the following:

- one of the main reasons why the initiative can be less efficient and functional is covered by the geographical features. It is quite difficult to imagine a borderless area without Kosovo in the



partnership, as the country lies just between Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia<sup>128</sup>.

- another important aspect that generated contra arguments that appeared in relations with the Open Balkan initiative is focusing on the economic impact and dimension of the initiative in the WB region. Based on the data, we can notice that there is a high difference between the economies of the countries of the WB region and the Serbian economy<sup>129</sup>. This is well illustrated by the fact that from the total of 300 economical actors present at the Economic Forum on Regional Cooperation, held in Skopje on the 29<sup>th</sup> of July 2021, there were more than 230 Serbian companies<sup>130</sup>. In fact, those who are against the initiative say that this process would strengthen the dominance of Serbian companies and would give way to the aspirations of the Serbian and Albanian economic sector to prevail even more in the region.
- the third main reason which cutting from the initiative's efficiency are the political aspects, which negatively influence the perception of the Open Balkan Initiative. Even though in the past years several meetings and agreements were organized and signed at bilateral and multilateral level between the countries of the WB. Even if we can speak about the existence of a formal European framework regarding cooperation, in the context of the European integration process. We can observe that there are still so-called "regional leadership aspirations" at the level of politicians. This type of aspirations generate animosity between political leaders and its making negotiations difficult or even impossible<sup>131</sup>.

Putting in balance all the pro and contra arguments related to the Open Balkan initiative and knowing the recent history of the WB, we need to mention probably one of the most important factors which can influence the success on the initiative. This is represented by the external factors, in terms of international relations<sup>132</sup>. We already mentioned that from the side of the EU there is a hesitating support in terms of this new regional proposal. In the case of Russia and China, we do not see any obvious support or protest against the initiative. What can be observe is that any possible presence of

<sup>128</sup> Brezar, Aleksandar, *As Eu membership stalls, Balkan countries make controversial move to create their mini-Schengen*, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/08/31/as-eu-membership-stalls-balkan-countries-make-controversial-move-to-create-their-own-mini-schengen> accessed in 11.04.23.

<sup>129</sup> Bartlett, Will, Prica, Ivana, *"Debt in the super-periphery: the case of the Western Balkans"*, Third World Thematics A TWQ Journal 2(1), 2017, p.3-13 DOI:10.1080/23802014.2017.1438850

<sup>130</sup> Economic Forum on Regional Cooperation, Skopje <https://skopje-economic-forum-2021.b2match.io/> accessed in 09.04.23

<sup>131</sup> Brezar, Aleksandar, *op. cit.*

<sup>132</sup> Pedi, Revecca, *Small States in Europe as a Buffer between East and West* in *Handbook on the Politics of Small States*, (Eds. Godfrey Baldacchino and Anders Wivel), 2020, p. 168-187

the above-mentioned powers in the region creates growing scepticism amongst certain WB countries.

Finally, we need to mention also the US position, regarding the Open Balkan initiative. The US ambassador to Serbia, stated that the goals of the Open Balkans initiative were crucial for the European future of Serbia and the entire region<sup>133</sup>. US special envoy for the Balkans, Gabriel Escobar, stated that the three countries that launched this initiative must have close negotiations with the other three sceptical partners, and their concerns should be taken into consideration. Without all six countries, the Open Balkans initiative cannot succeed<sup>134</sup>.

## Final remarks

European enlargement through the accession of the Western Balkan states to the EU has been announced as a central goal of EU policy, but also that of the six countries concerned. Accession to the European Union has proved to be, through its own mechanisms for accession negotiations, an important motivating factor with a large impact on the process of implementing structural reforms and democratizing this region. The political integration of the Western Balkans is, as in other cases, preceded by an economic, cultural, educational or security integration that all these Balkan states have been in need of. Deepening integration through opening up and conducting accession negotiations has most often also meant a process of stabilization and resolution of the political turmoil that is constantly encountered in these states. However, the integration process of these countries fell into trap as they were exposed to be crisis management countries for the EU rather than as countries to which the EU should enlarge, which damaged their integration prospects. This legacy has continued to harm their European integration prospects. Once the countries are recipients of the EU crisis management, it is difficult to expect a change in the paradigm from a crisis to a member.

All the Western Balkans countries have Stabilization and Association Agreements with the EU, opening up trade and aligning the region with EU standards and also very important, provides the overall framework for the relations of the EU with these countries. The EU, through its policies and financial instruments also provides political and financial support for the countries of the region to foster good neighbor relations and build shared prosperity through regional integration. In addition

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<sup>133</sup> Euractiv press article: *Escobar: Open Balkans initiative cannot succeed without all Western Balkans countries*, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/escobar-open-balkans-initiative-cannot-succeed-without-all-western-balkans-countries/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/escobar-open-balkans-initiative-cannot-succeed-without-all-western-balkans-countries/) accessed 13.01.23

<sup>134</sup> *Ibidem*



to its strong political support for the Western Balkans and the Berlin Process, the EU supports regional co-operation organizations, to boost economic development, improve connectivity, and enhance security and many other benefits across the region.

This research has illustrated the importance of regional cooperation initiatives and presented how the cooperation initiatives like The Berlin Process and the Open Balkan Initiative has faced difficulties in claiming its relevance and legitimacy. This study contributes to the literature on legitimacy in regional cooperation arrangements and on the role of the legitimacy in their functioning. This study shows that the factors of legitimacy such as inclusivity is indeed challenging the legitimacy of the regional cooperation arrangements. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that other regional cooperation arrangements are better representative or inclusive, but the specific context and circumstances that surround the perception and the negotiations regarding The Berlin Process or the Open Balkan Initiative have underlined the importance of the consultation and representativity.

Regarding the research questions, drawn at the methodological part of the paper, we consider the Q1 is answered through the fact that Regional cooperation has been one of the greatest achievements of the Western Balkans. The combination of the shared objectives for the integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions and the relatively high level of regional integration is what makes the Western Balkans different, better, today from other transition regions. In terms of Q2, due to the objective needs of the Western Balkans, and since stronger regional cooperation and good neighbor relations are explicit requirements for the Western Balkans aspirant countries in their EU membership bids, we can definitely affirm that the process of regional cooperation will increase in the future. The importance of regional cooperation is underlined by two key benefits. First, it reduces tension and strengthens regional stability, which in turn is a key precondition for sustainable development and second, it brings various practical benefits as the fulfillment of the accession criteria.

The inability of both sides, the European Union on the one hand, and the Western Balkan states on the other, to find solutions to deepen the integration process has led to the need to legitimize a new roadmap. Adapting to new realities, including new EU demands, is a difficult process and most often creates frustration and mistrust.

In terms of the Open Balkan initiative, several say that it is just an advertisement, a PR instrument, there is no real political will behind it. Analyst points out that so far nothing concrete has happened. The initiative was created in 2019 with certain objectives and target dates, which all



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expired and when expired, were simply extended again. In our perception, the success of the initiative depends to a large extent on the willingness of the political elites in the Balkans. At level of declarations, we have already seen many initiatives in the Western Balkans, but in practice not many of these were able to survive.

We can conclude that if neither European integration nor the Open Balkan Initiative will succeed, good-neighbourly relations can be damaged and threaten the European security. Not least, the European geopolitical and geostrategic interests in the WB will be reduced making place for the influence of other global powers. Absence of EU membership progress in both the reality and in the perceptions of the public has decreased the credibility and leverage of the EU in the region, laying the basis for criticism of the EU role and for emergence of alternative thinking in the minds of the Western Balkan leaders.

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