

## **SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND TERRITORIAL COOPERATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS**

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***Abstract.*** 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.

On the other hand, social responsibility and territorial cooperation in the Western Balkans are critical topics and deeply intertwined, driven by EU accession, fostering regional stability for regional development, peacebuilding, and fostering greater integration into the European Union. Nowadays, civil society represents one of the most actively discussed concepts in the field of social sciences. Several researchers underline the importance of the civil society in the social responsibility phenomenon.

***Keywords:*** European integration, National sovereignty, Western Balkans, Federalization, Border politics

### **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

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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 (Polgár, Brie, 2023).

On the other hand, social responsibility and territorial cooperation in the Western Balkans are critical topics and deeply intertwined, driven by EU accession, fostering regional stability for regional development, peacebuilding, and fostering greater integration into the European Union. These concepts intersect with various economic, social, and political issues in a region, which has a complex history and a diverse cultural landscape. Through the combined outcomes and initiatives generated by social responsibility and territorial cooperation, better governance systems can be created, focusing on joint solutions for youth, environment, economic development, rule of law, and infrastructure, ultimately aiming to bridge gaps in local capacities, improve public services, and build social cohesion by tackling fragmentation and encouraging shared ownership for sustainable development.

Methodologically, the emphasis of our analysis primarily falls on the legitimacy of this type of cooperation and initiatives derived from social responsibility and territorial cooperation. 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.

The purpose of this research is to analyse the unfolding of the negotiations regarding the operationalization of new regional cooperation initiatives which involve social responsibility. 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 including social responsibility

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

## **CONTEXT, HISTORICAL ELEMENTS AND BACKGROUND OF TERRITORIAL COOPERATION**

The fall of communism and the disintegration of Yugoslavia have amplified in a first stage-the process of identity 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 identity dialogue (Brie, Jusufi, Polgar, 2021). This process has also been favored by the aspirations for European integration that these peoples have. Today, most states in the Western Balkan are waiting to be integrated into the EU. 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

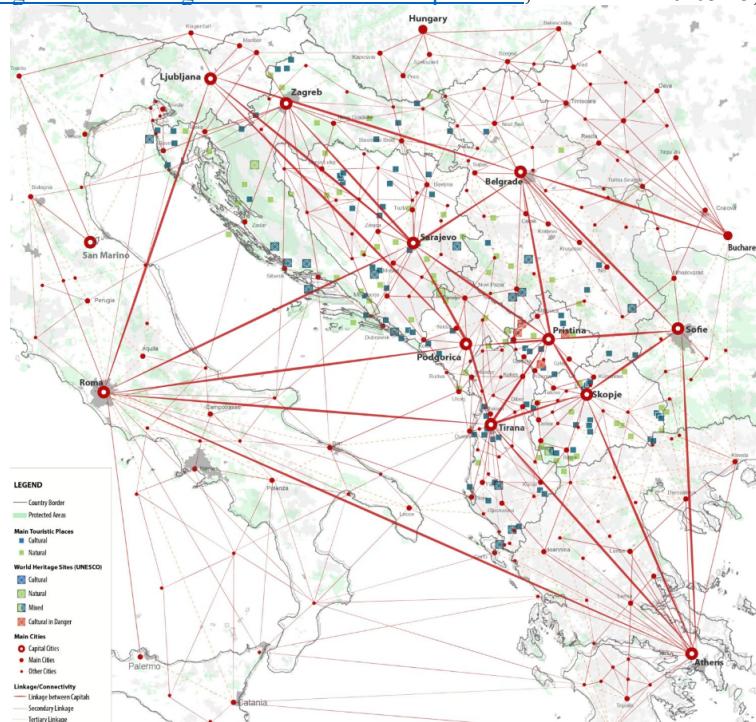
institutional reform have slowed down / stopped the enlargement process) an integrating realignment of all identity communities within these states (Atanasov, 2022).

Also, 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 (Atanasov, 2022). 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 on self-help for solving problems (Herta, Corpadean, 2019).

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.

Even if in the past years the process was promising, the actual situation show that this is a highly contested and unfinished project. The refugee crisis and the growing geopolitical interest of other actors has turned EUs attention and put the Western Balkans back in the focus and on the political map of Europe, underlining the strategic importance of the region for Europe's security and stability.

**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 19.05.25)



## THE IDEA OF TERRITORIAL AND REGIONAL COOPERATION

The idea of regional cooperation or regionalism, seen as policy cooperation in different areas among geographically proximate neighbours (Bozhilova, 2009), 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 (Gunnarson, 2000).

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 (Gunnarson, 2000), as a source for achievement of Regionness (Hettne, Soderbaum, 2000) with the capacity of a region to articulate its interests through relevant institutions (Hettne, Soderbaum, 1998).

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 (Anastasakis, Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2002). 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 (Mittelman, 1996). 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 (Rosecrance, 1991). In addition, authoritarian leaders can exploit regionalism to boost their domestic regimes (Debre, 2021). Thus, the New Regionalism (Kneuer, Demmelhuber, Peresson, Zumbrägel, 2018) 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 (Anastasakis, Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2002) and with both external and internal incentives in play that have kept the regional cooperation alive (Libman, Obydemkova, 2018).

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 (Russo, Stoddard, 2018). In this way, the regional cooperation boils down to a movement between the desire for domination (Stoddard, 2017), on the one hand, and of emancipation in the struggle for core and peripheral positions, on the other (Vayrinen, 1997).

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 (Ambrosio, 2008). Their struggle is for relative gains and

regional cooperation is pursued to establish a regional industrial base, enhance bargaining power, lock in domestic political reforms, or avoid national isolation (Clinton, 1995).

There are also critical political attitudes towards regionalism in play that are also often shaped by the negative historical experiences (Duus, 1993).

## THE HISTORY AND PRACTICE OF TERRITORIAL AND 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 (Collins, 2009). 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 (Petričušić, 2005).

Later, the EU encouraged reforms in the region which were meant to serve as pre-conditions for accession into the EU (Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2002). 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 (Petričušić, 2005).

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 (Petričušić, 2005).

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, (Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2002) 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 (Brie, Jusufi, Polgar, 2023).

The Western Balkans has had interesting features as regards the regional cooperation. In over 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 (Svetozlar, 2009). 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 (Bechev, 2004).

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 (Seroka, 2008). 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 (Favaretto, 2000). However, increasingly, this region has faced the new challenges in the direction of marketisation and democratisation, and there are emerging regional preferences (Pippidi, 1999).

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 (Vayrinen, 1997). 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 (Tsoukalis, 1999).

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 (Anastasaki, Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2002). 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 behaviour (Vucetic, 2001). National identities in the Western Balkans have been defined and have operated in opposition to each other (Todorova, 2004). 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 (Anastasakis, Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2002).

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 territorial 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 (Anastasakis, Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2002).

The snowball effects of territorial 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 region to follow the suit (Dangerfield, 2004).

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 (Brie, Jusufi, Polgar, 2023).

## **IMPASSE IN THE EU MEMBERSHIP PROSPECTS AS CAUSALITY FOR FORMATION OF A 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). 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. 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, such as the one imposed by the EU member Bulgaria on North Macedonia, over the issues of history, identity and language (Rizaov, 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.

Parallel to the absence of the EU membership prospects, the Western Balkans have experienced economic crisis considering the COVID-19 pandemic that engulfed the region starting from March 2020 onwards. It has been already two years where the countries have experienced high rates of infections and deaths in world records arising from the pandemic, 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 (360 stepeni, 2021).

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 (Stratulat, Kmezić, Tzifakis, Bonomi, Nechev, 2020).

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 (DW-North Macedonia, 2021). 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. In this case for some of the leaders the intra-regional economic integration can be considered as a substitute to the absence of the European integration (Semini, 2021).

## **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 (European Parliament).

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 (Deutsche Zussamenarbeit, 2022).

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 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 (Vulovic, 2022).

The principal 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 eleven 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 (Jovanovici, Holzner, 2023).

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 belief of the general public that all the initiative is a paternalistic project dominated from abroad, in which local actors simply follow the instructions (Jovanovici, Holzner, 2023).

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 (Jovanovici, Holzner, 2023).

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 (European Western Balkans, 2021). 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 (Politico, 2021).

## **SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS**

Social responsibility in the Western Balkans has grown notably over the past two decades, shaped by post-transition reforms, EU integration goals, and strong community traditions.

The new socio-political realities, associated with a process of consolidation and strengthening democracy, have led to the redrawing of the social structures in the Balkan space. Competition and mutual distrust marked these societies. Still, the idea of liberal democracy started to be more and more implemented (Polgar, Jusufi, 2023).

Civil society was reborn after the fall of communism, but still was affected by the lack of financial support and a proper legislative framework. The idea that democracy, the rule of law and civil society are not similar or connected might seem incorrect or strange to some, especially nowadays, when these concepts are perceived as the foundation of democracy (Polgar, Jusufi, 2023).

Western Balkan region, in general, represent a good testing ground for analysing the impact of civil society over the democratisation process. First, all the countries have been and still are home for major disputes and efforts to accelerate democratisation. Second, all of countries, civil society was not built from scratch after 1990. Although these states did not inherit a proper civil society, a solid and comprehensively institutionalized sphere can be discovered, which included trade unions, professional associations, organizations representing different social and interest groups (Nimu-Pârvulescu -Todor 2016).

In the communist period these types of organizations had many members, subsidiaries, since the participation in the activities was mandatory. Basically, the associative life was imposed and controlled by the party and in this way became politicized, bureaucratized and used for propaganda.

Third, the civil society is much more attentive to the process of social responsibility. Therefore, if a role by civil society is expected in boosting social responsibility, this is likely to be detected in the western Balkan neighbourhood, where

the societies themselves and international actors have actively sought to contribute to the democratisation process.

The level of social responsibility reflects a different content of meaning according to the type of politics. Nowadays it has become clear that in the political discourse, there is a lively debate about the value content of social responsibility, which is also presents the different attitudes in the East and in the West of the European continent (Polgar, Jusufi, 2023).

In the new annual report on the state of democracy in the world, Freedom House ranks the states of the Western Balkans in the category of states with a "hybrid regime" and in the category of states with a semi-consolidated democratic regime with an under average level and presence of social responsibility. Based on the report, in most of the Western Balkan states there is a decline of the social responsibility phenomenon (Freedom House 2022). While these regimes combine elements of democracy and authoritarian rule, they are analytically distinct from both. They may be democratic in the minimal sense that they feature regular, competitive elections, but their dysfunctional institutions are unable to deliver the definitive components of a liberal democracy: checks and balances, the rule of law, and robust protections for the rights and liberties of all (Freedom House 2022).

In the past decade, in WB countries we could witness several antidemocratic and illiberal practices. Civil society from these countries are confronting permanent disquieting threats. However, the individuals and groups that compose each country's civil society have remained steadfast in their efforts to hold bad actors accountable and promote the public good.

The emergence of civil society has been a major feature of the social responsibility phenomenon. While a large amount of work has been developed on the significance social responsibility in the development of a democratic regime, the question of its relationship with the democratisation tendencies on one hand and autocratisation on the other has been answered in limited ways, at least as it relates to recent major developments that have affected the quality of social responsibility in the Western Balkans. While there has been a rapid and extensive spread of civil society institutions and practices in the region, the 'internalisation' of the 'norm' of civil society has emerged as a benchmark in assessing the capacities of civil society to bring or contribute to a change. Thus, the role of civil society in social responsibility democratisation and autocratisation tendencies can be further enlightened with the application of the benchmark of internalisation of the norm of civil society (Polgar, Jusufi, 2023).

What constitutes a norm of civil society in the social responsibility phenomenon? The explanation below builds on Katzenstein's definition of international norms as "collective expectations for the proper behaviour of actors with a given identity" (Katzenstein, 1996: 5). While there has been broad agreement among democracies on the necessity of the existence of social responsibility through civil society in a democracy, a feature of autocratisation has been the contestation and violation of civil society as a norm.

Normative change does not occur immediately. According to the literature, the norm-like cycle includes three phases, namely the emergence, cascade, and internalisation phases (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). The cycle begins with the formulation of a new norm(s), continues with compliance to the new norm by the states and ends with the internalisation of the new norm; for example, increased independence of the civil society.

However, the nature, culture, and dynamics of civil society, provide the government actors with numerous points of co-optation or capture of civil society. Civil society has its own organisational culture and dynamics and has a tendency to accommodate or remain receptive to new demands of the government. In this direction, the autocratization tendencies tend to contest the diffusion of civil society norms, resulting in a halting of internalisation of the norms related to civil society.

Social responsibility in the Western Balkans is developing through civil society but uneven. It is strongest where EU integration pressure, active civil society, and international business intersect. Continued progress depends on stronger institutions, economic stability, and sustained public engagement.

## CONCLUSIONS

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 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 social responsibility and territorial cooperation initiatives and presented how the cooperation initiatives like The Berlin Process has faced difficulties in claiming its relevance and legitimacy. We consider that this study contributes to the literature on social responsibility and territorial cooperation arrangements and on the role of the legitimacy in their functioning. This study shows that the factors of legitimacy such as social responsibility is indeed challenging the legitimacy of territorial 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 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 territorial cooperation has been one of the greatest achievements in 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's.

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.

We can conclude that if neither European integration nor other territorial cooperation systems 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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