European engagement with the Western Balkans under the Berlin Process: analysing progress in 2020-2021

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Acknowledgements

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Acronyms

BP	Berlin Process
C2C	Citizen-to-citizen
CDI	Cooperation and Development Institute
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement
CRM	Common Regional Market
CSO	Civil society organization
DG EAC	(EC) Directorate-General for Education and Culture
DG NEAR	(EC) Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
DG REGIO	(EC) Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EC	European Commission
EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign direct investment
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH
HRVP	High Representative and Vice President
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
LIP	Large Infrastructure Project
MAP REA	Multi-annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area
MS	(EU) Member States
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
P2P	People-to-people
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office
SEE	South-East Europe
SME	Small & Medium Enterprises
UNEP MGCY	United Nations Environmental Program Major Group for Children and Youth
V4	Visegrád Group
WB	The Western Balkan region (as a noun)/Western Balkan (as an adjective)
WB6	The six Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia)
WBIF	Western Balkans Investment Framework
WBYCP	Western Balkans Youth Cooperation Platform
WED	World Environment Day

Contents

Executive summary

This briefing analyses European support for progress in the Western Balkan region (WB) under the Berlin Process (BP) with a focus on the period culminating in the 2020 Sofia and 2021 Berlin Summits.

It is divided into three sections: first, an overview of the BP, focusing on the Sofia and Berlin Summits and their role in setting the course for regional cooperation within the BP. Second, an analysis of the progress made against commitments on key BP topics (as set out in the respective declarations and chairs' conclusions) during 2020-2021. This draws on: (i) recent findings from research and analysis conducted on behalf of various organisations and/or governmental institutions; (ii) the results of interviews; (iii) perspectives from local, regional, and international media and relevant commentators. The third section concludes by discussing the future of the BP and setting out recommendations for BP organisers and stakeholders based on the research and analysis.

The analysis of progress in this briefing highlights in particular that:
- The creation of a Common Regional Market (CRM) and the Green Agenda for the WB have enormous positive potential – but fine words now need assiduous follow up.
- The establishment of 'Green Lanes' to facilitate movement during the COVID-19 pandemic and the abolition of roaming charges have provided further successful examples of regional cooperation – even if there is much more that could be done to enhance connectivity, digital inclusion and freedom of movement across the region and into European Union (EU) countries.
- Doubts over EU integration and accession processes on all sides risk undermining political and technical progress towards regional reconciliation, cooperation and integration. For example, by excluding three of the six WB countries (the WB6), the 'Open Balkan' Initiative could undermine the strong potential of the CRM, which enjoys wider regional buy-in.
- There is room for greater focus on security challenges in the region within the BP – but these relate more to building societal demand for action on organized crime, corruption and ethno-nationalism than investing in counter-terrorism.
- Engagement with civil society, youth and environmental movements – despite being a relative strength of the BP to date – could be markedly improved, with knock-on benefits in all other areas. Youth structures in particular have further untapped potential.
- Reconciliation efforts remain stuck, and thus warrant more dedicated political engagement, more careful process design and greater inclusivity.
- BP work on Roma integration appears encouraging if kept in focus.

Overall, the BP is at a crossroads. It has had some notable policy successes, and the dialogue it promotes is as necessary as ever, but further tangible progress on key regional issues is now growing increasingly urgent. Lack of a clear governance structure, weak institutional memory and fluctuations in priorities of leading states – as well as tensions and weak incentives for progress within the region – could undermine all this. The BP's complementarity to formal EU enlargement processes also needs fine-tuning.

For the potential of the BP to be maintained and for peacebuilding, democratisation and Euro-Atlantic integration of the WB to move ahead, a group of countries and leaders must now take on the mantle. Building on this analysis, The Balkan Forum offers BP organisers and stakeholders recommendations in six areas:

1. **Enable the BP to regain momentum by giving it a stronger backbone, setting it on firmer ground and enabling it to share, coordinate, learn and adapt.**

2. **Unleash the full potential of WB civil society within the BP by integrating it as an engine of ideas and accountability.**

3. **Use the BP to craft a WB region where young people have more interconnections, opportunities and voice.**

4. **Enhance cooperation and synergies across the WB6, and help key initiatives like the CRM and Green Agenda take flight.**

5. **Keep reconciliation at the centre of BP efforts to build regional cooperation, and build on strong public support for this.**

6. **Enhance freedom of movement and connectivity.**

Introduction

As the European Commission (EC) officially recalled in a 2020 report on the region, the EU and its Member States (MS) have, since the Feira and Thessaloniki Summits in 2000 and 2003, repeatedly reaffirmed their backing for the WB6 to integrate into Europe.[1] Yet progress towards EU enlargement and WB integration began to stall during the 2010s, in particular following the inaugural speech of former EC President Jean-Claude Juncker, in which he declared there would be no enlargement to the WB6 during his mandate. In response, then German Chancellor Angela Merkel initiated the BP in 2014 to 'revitalize' or 'strengthen' WB6-EU ties, enhance regional cooperation and sustain the process for EU integration.

This briefing looks back on the past two years of progress under the BP, asking whether it has successfully kept the 'Thessaloniki promise' alive. Is dialogue generating confidence and momentum, or are European and WB6 decision-makers losing patience with limited progress and broken promises? How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected dynamics? And where does the region stand now?[2] To answer these questions, it examines recent developments within the BP, the state of play on key issues and the main challenges, before drawing out conclusions and recommendations.

The briefing draws on both desk research (covering official, civil society and media sources) and a series of 17 in-depth interviews with relevant experts and officials, from both within and beyond the WB region, conducted between July and November 2021. Interviews were semi-structured to allow flexibility to explore key issues in depth.

1   The Berlin Process: vision and scope

As set out in 2014, the BP's purpose was to 'make additional real progress in the reform process, in resolving outstanding bilateral and internal issues, and in achieving reconciliation within and between the societies in the region', as well as to enhance 'regional economic cooperation and lay the foundations for sustainable growth'.[3] The process is supported by the EC, international monetary organizations, and the countries committed to the Process (Austria,

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[1] EC, (2020), 'Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans' (EC), p 1, <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf> [last accessed 8 August 2021].
[2] See also: Pisonero-Hernandez, A, Muletier, Z, (2021) 'Press corner – 2021 Enlargement package: European Commission assesses and sets out reform priorities for the Western Balkans and Turkey', (EC), <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_5275> [last accessed 22 February 2022].
[3] Berlin Process stakeholders, (2014), 'Final Declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans. (Berlin Process), p 1, <https://berlinprocess.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Final-Declaration-by-the-Chair-of-the-Conference-on-the-Western-Balkans.pdf> [last accessed 6 August 2021].

Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Poland and the United Kingdom). The EC in particular is active within the BP and supports it by promoting reforms and providing funding and technical assistance. The BP also builds on non-governmental inputs provided by representatives of regional civil society organisations (Civil Society Forum of the Western Balkan Summit Series), youth organisations (Youth Forum) and business associations (Business Forum).

Despite the fact that the BP is not formally connected with the enlargement policy, as not all EU Member States are included, it complements each country's EU accession process, which is also governed by the *acquis communautaire*[4] as a key reference document for the BP agenda.[5] Thus the BP strikes a balance between supporting the WB6 to move towards accession, and helping to align the region with the legal environment of the EU, while steering clear of the weeds of the complex, formal enlargement files and negotiations. The broader intention underpinning the BP is to encourage WB6 leaders and societies to look beyond existing tensions and divisions towards their common interests; and the BP has supported several useful regional initiatives that go beyond the enlargement process.

The BP has its share of weaknesses. It was slow to gather momentum during early summits in London (2018) and Poznań (2019), and struggles with lack of institutional memory and inconsistency (given the diverging agendas pursued by each host country). With Germany maintaining a key role in driving the process, other governments have suggested that the process could be more inclusive, and be more assiduously focused on facilitating WB6 accession.

The BP also has a long way to go to address key challenges confronting the region. However explicitly the BP suggests that greater regional cooperation will strengthen the accession prospects of the WB6, it remains hard to foresee favourable outcomes in resolving bilateral disputes at this stage,[6] most notably the ongoing deadlock in the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue.[7] Meanwhile, the ongoing dispute between North Macedonia and Bulgaria could prove an

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[4] Author unknown, (undated) 'About - The Berlin Process', *The Berlin Process - Information and Resource Centre*, <https://berlinprocess.info/about/> [last accessed 6 August 2021].

[5] Author unknown, "Berlin Process | The achievements and the future of the Berlin Process", in *Berlin Process (Implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH - GIZ)*, <https://www.berlinprocess.de/en/the-achievements-and-the-future-of-the-berlin-process-40> [last accessed 13 May 2022].

[6] Author unknown, (2021) 'Western Balkans Berlin Summit 2021 - CHAIR'S CONCLUSIONS', *(Bundesregierung (German Federal Government))*, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/western-balkans-summit-chair-s-conclusions-1939788> [last accessed 29 July 2021].

[7] Kamberi, B, (2021) (translation), 'Qui perd le plus à l'échec du dialogue entre le Kosovo et la Serbie?' (Original title: 'Kush dhe çfarë humb nga dështimi i dialogut Kosovë-Serbi?'), *Le Courrier des Balkans*, (translated from *Radio Evropa e Lirë*), <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/Kosovo-Serbie-dialogue-et-integration-europeenne> [last accessed 23 July 2021].

important barrier to the former's accession. On another note, during the interview process it was argued by a European researcher on regional cooperation that 'the Berlin Process is being emptied out of content, as its initiatives and deliverables are being taken over by the EU in the context of the enlargement process'. Nonetheless, overall impressions about the BP were largely positive among experts and officials interviewed.

1.1   The 2020 Sofia summit: blazing a Green trail and introducing a Common Regional Market (CRM)

The Sofia Summit took place at the end of a very tough year for the WB. In addition to the health and socio-economic issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, the context for regional cooperation had grown unsettled in the wake of various setbacks in the EU enlargement process.[8] Just as the 2018 London summit had been overshadowed by Brexit, the preparations for Sofia occurred beneath the cloud of the bilateral dispute between North Macedonia and Bulgaria.[9] The Summit convened participants to confront complex challenges without robust mechanisms for tackling them. Nonetheless, a new approach whereby one WB state and one EU MS acted as co-hosts proved valuable, and the process held together both organisationally and politically.[10]

As a result, the Summit underscored the BP's value and established an important vision for regional cooperation. One outcome was the launch of a Common Regional Market (CRM), which aims to decrease fees for transactions across borders, eliminate practical business obstacles, align investment rules, ensure mutual acceptance of qualifications across the WB6, and encourage online economic activity.[11] The launch of CRM restored the BP's credibility and pushed forward for the region's cohesive economic development. The leap from the Multi-annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area (MAP REA) to the establishment of the CRM showed determination and vision, reinforced by a clear roadmap with specific tasks to be

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[8] The Enlargement process was in a phase of stagnation, with the EU in some cases failing to provide predictability to the process. A new methodology for enlargement was introduced previously to the Sofia Summit by the Commission, in an effort to untangle the institutional decision making discrepancies within the EU. Nonetheless, no real progress has been attained with regard to opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, or to the negotiation process with Montenegro and Serbia. See: Zoran Nechev et al, (2021), 'Bouncing back: Completing the EU unification process', (BiEPAG), <https://biepag.eu/publication/policy-brief-bouncing-back-completing-the-eu-unification-process/> [last accessed 17 November 2021].

[9] Drosopulos, M, et al, (2020), 'Berlin Process: Overview Of The Progress By The Six Western Balkans Countries Since London And Poznań Summits', (The Balkan Forum), p 11.

[10] Author unknown, (2020), 'Chair's Conclusions' [Sofia Summit], <https://www.transport-community.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Chairs-Conclusions_Sofia-2020.pdf> [last accessed 16 November 2021].

[11] Jakov Marusic, S, (2020), 'Balkan Leaders Adopt Plan for Common Regional Market', *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/11/10/balkan-leaders-adopt-plan-for-common-regional-market/> [last accessed 29 July 2021].

carried out by the actors and mechanisms involved. WB6 leaders expect it to result in greater levels of regional trade.[12] The initiative is modelled on the four freedoms of the EU Single Market, updated with modern features such as digital transformation and a green framework of living. It thus helps prepare the region for accession by aligning it more closely with the EU Single Market model.[13]

The summit also resulted in the launch of the Green Agenda for the WB6,[14] backed by a dedicated EC communication.[15] Although some interviewees foresaw implementation challenges, and flagged the low starting point, the Green Agenda commitments were also seen as a very positive development. Given the challenging and complex regional context, from an EC perspective the adoption of the CRM Action Plan and the Green Agenda at the summit exceeded expectations: putting in place clear commitments, incentives and accountability, and helping to chart a course for the BP to follow over the next four years.[16]

1.2 The 2021 Berlin summit: the dwindling of forward momentum

Desk research and interviews suggested that the 2021 Berlin Summit largely served to reiterate existing commitments and was thus disappointing. Although the summit was intended as a contribution to her legacy, the impending departure of Chancellor Merkel created a degree of uncertainty over the future of the BP. This was compounded by revelations over certain non-papers whose origins and authenticity were not verified but which generated controversy.[17]

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[12] RCC, (2020) 'Western Balkans Leaders Declaration on Common Regional Market', (RCC) <https://www.rcc.int/docs/544/declaration-on-common-regional-market> [last accessed 16 November 2021].

[13] EC (2020), 'European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Policy Highlight', (EC), <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/policy-highlights/common-regional-market_e> [last accessed 15 November 2021].

[14] BP and RCC, (2020), 'SOFIA DECLARATION ON THE GREEN AGENDA FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS' (BP and RCC), <https://berlinprocess.info/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Leaders-Declaration-on-the-Green-Agenda-for-the-WB.pdf> [last accessed 9 August 2021].

[15] EC, (2020), 'Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans', (COM(2020) 641 final), <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/green_agenda_for_the_western_balkans_en.pdf> [last accessed 9 August 2021].

[16] RCC, (2020), 'Common Regional Market Action Plan', (RCC), <https://www.rcc.int/docs/543/common-regional-market-action-plan> [last accessed 16 November 2021].

[17] Dérens, J, et al, (2021) 'Changer les frontières des Balkans: un "non paper" qui bouleverse la région', *Le Courrier des Balkans*, <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/changer-les-frontières-des-balkans-un-non-paper-qui-bouleverse-la-region> [last accessed 6 August 2021]. Živanović, M, et al, (2021), 'Un "non paper" attribué à la France et à l'Allemagne secoue le Kosovo et la Serbie', *Le Courrier des Balkans* (translation from *Radio Slobodna Evropa*), <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/Un-non-paper-attribue-a-la-France-et-a-l-Allemagne-secoue-le-Kosovo-et-la-Serbie> [last accessed 6 August 2021].

The climate of mistrust made it harder to move forward diplomatically,[18] and there were no advances or breakthroughs in accession negotiations.

Although work had been done at technical level on three issues (the recognition of diplomas, free movement within the WB6 with national ID cards, and the CRM) concrete progress was stymied by foot-dragging during the final stages.[19] Freedom of movement – seen by one interviewee as 'low-hanging fruit' – thus remains hostage to bureaucratic procedures, hampering tourism and business mobility. If the Berlin summit marked an opportunity to push all WB6 countries to formulate a stronger approach to the fight against corruption, reform in public administration, and border conflicts, it also failed to propose an immediate response to these challenges. Nor did it help to tackle the bilateral disputes between Kosovo and Serbia. It thus arguably underlined a stagnation of EU influence in the WB6.

Despite these shortcomings, the WB6 did make progress on certain issues – such as the abolition of regional roaming charges – arguably both a concrete step and a limited signal to the public in the WB about the potential for further progress on freedom of movement. They also outlined a regional development plan and accompanying guidance covering public administration, rule of law, and judiciary reforms – albeit with implementation improvability in these areas stressed during the interview process – and reaffirmed their overall commitment to the CRM, EU integration and sustaining the BP at the summit.

2   Delivering on promises: WB6 implementation of Sofia and Berlin summit commitments

2.1   European integration

The EU regularly restates its commitment to potential WB6 accession – while failing to establish a clear timetable.[20] This has given rise to significant doubts shared by WB6 governments and societies, and the risk that enthusiasm for alignment with European standards and approaches will evaporate in the absence of tangible progress. In some cases, WB6 authorities and citizens may increasingly be attracted by the offer of other external stakeholders interested in the

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[18] Marović, J, & N Tzifakis, (2021) 'Non-Papers and the elephant in the room: Rule of law in the Western Balkans - European Western Balkans.'. in *European Western Balkans*, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/07/23/non-papers-and-the-elephant-in-the-room-rule-of-law-in-the-western-balkans/> [last accessed 3 August 2021].

[19] Interview with technical expert, Summer 2021. Recognition of diplomas has in fact been neglected since the Poznań Summit: Drosopulos, M, et al (2020), op cit, p 14.

[20] Author unknown, (2021), 'L'Union réaffirme encore et toujours la "perspective européenne" des Balkans occidentaux', *Le Courrier des Balkans*, <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/Union-perspective-europeenne-Balkans-occidentaux> [last accessed 20 July 2021].

region. The EC's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) acknowledged this in its 2020 WB6 Communication by defining enlargement to the region as a 'geostrategic investment'.[21] Similarly, in May 2021 High Representative/Vice-President (HRVP) Borrell also highlighted the importance of geopolitics within the EU's overall approach.[22]

After the 2020 Sofia summit, the EU made extensive diplomatic efforts to enhance dialogue and relations with the WB6 in preparation for a fruitful Berlin Summit in 2021 – with top EU leaders hosting WB6 Heads of State on multiple occasions.[23] For the European External Action Service (EEAS), these activities amounted to a signal that 'The future of the WB lies within the EU', echoing the language of the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit while also betraying the EU's awareness of the need to redouble lobbying in support of this objective and publicly reaffirm its commitments in this area. The fact that WB relations are handled simultaneously through the EU's enlargement bureaucracy, via the external action service and via MS initiatives has the potential to generate complexity and ambiguity that can risk adding to the confusion and mistrust over stagnant accession processes. As the German government asserted in 2021: 'If we are not careful, we will lose the WB. […] That is exactly why we need to keep our commitments to the WB6 countries. We need to explain our support on the ground.'[24]

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[21] EC (2020), 'Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans' (EC), p 1, <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/default/files/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf> [last accessed 8 August 2021].

[22] 'The [EU Foreign] Ministers also supported our strong and wide-ranging political engagement. I repeat, it goes beyond enlargement. Many times, when we talk about the WB, people understand that we are going to talk about adhesion - if it is going to be quickly or slowly [done], when [will]chapters open and close… That is important, but today we are going to have a broader approach, a geopolitical approach to the region, and not focusing only on enlargement, although the Commissioner in charge of Neighbourhood [and Enlargement], Olivér Várhelyi, will also attend the meeting.' See: STANO (Lead Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy), P, & Z MULETIER (Press Officer for Neighbourhood and Enlargement/Foreign Affairs and Security Policy), (2021) 'Western Balkans: Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell ahead of informal dinner with the six leaders', (EEAS/EC), <https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/98664/western-balkans-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-ahead-informal-dinner_en> [last accessed 10 August 2021].

[23] According to the EEAS, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, then North Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski, and later Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti were successively welcomed by EU top decision-makers in April 2021. President Vučić and Prime Minister Kurti were hosted by President of the EC Ursula von der Leyen. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, also met all three. President of the European Parliament David Sassoli also met Pendarovski. Furthermore, the HRVP and the three WB6 leaders convened with European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi. Members of Bosnia and Herzegovina's tripartite Presidency, Milorad Dodik, Šefik Džaferović, and Željko Komšić also exchanged online with HRVP Borrell. EEAS, (2021), 'The future of the Western Balkans lies within the European Union.'. (EEAS/EC) <https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/turkmenistan/97584/future-western-balkans-lies-within-european-union_en> [last accessed 10 August 2021].

[24] Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, cited in: Inotai, E, Jakov Marusic, S, (2021) 'Talk of Separating Balkan EU Aspirants Sows Confusion, Suspicion', *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/05/13/talk-of-separating-balkan-eu-aspirants-sows-confusion-suspicion/> [last accessed 20 July 2021].

Nonetheless, as the European Parliament noted with concern in 2021: 'the European Council has so far failed to approve the negotiating framework for North Macedonia, jeopardizing the Union's credibility and reducing the EU's transformative power in the WB.'[25] Shortly after solving its name issue with Greece in 2018, and with North Macedonia's membership talks set to begin, Skopje became caught up in another bilateral dispute with Sofia, with the latter leveraging its EU MS position to press North Macedonia to acknowledge that the language spoken in the country is a mere dialect of Bulgarian.

Another stumbling block – fed *inter alia* by Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša's controversial approach to historical narratives and media freedom – has been disquiet within Europe over the risks of democratic backsliding by accession candidates after they have joined the EU.[26]

As an antidote to the stagnation of accession processes, various civil society organisations (CSOs) proposed in 2021 'that the accession process should be unpacked into functional/sectoral and institutional elements permitting partial and progressive membership in stages, based on the achieved level of progress under strict monitoring and conditionality.'[27] The fact remains that while the EU is working through its hesitancy, its credibility and the power of its incentives are dwindling as WB leaders and the public lose faith, and this in turn risks handing the momentum to ethno-nationalists and their authoritarian allies in Moscow and elsewhere.

2.2   Freedom of movement

In response to the question 'What would the EU membership mean to you personally?' in the 2021 Balkan Barometer, freedom of movement has overtaken economic prosperity as the primary priority.[28] Yet for some of those we spoke with, free movement within the WB is growing increasingly complicated.[29]

As interviewees were quick to point out, progress on freedom of movement is linked to, and illustrates the far-reaching implications of, bilateral disputes: as long as Serbia and Kosovo

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[25] Kyuchyuk (Rapporteur), I, (2021), 'Report on the 2019-2020 Commission Reports on North Macedonia', (Europarl.europa.eu), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0040_EN.html> [last accessed 6 August 2021].
[26] See, for example, Dérens, J, Rico, S, (2021), 'Une Slovénie en pleine dérive autoritaire à la tête de l'Union européenne', *Le Courrier des Balkans*, <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/Une-Slovenie-en-pleine-derive-autoritaire-a-la-tete-de-l-Union-europeenne> [last accessed 14 August 2021].
[27] Lazarević et al, (2021), 'Avant-garde proposal for EU enlargement to the Western Balkans' (euractiv.com), <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/opinion/avant-garde-proposal-for-eu-enlargement-to-the-western-balkans/> [last accessed 6 August 2021].
[28] RCC, (2021), '2021 Balkan Barometer | Personal Attitudes Toward EU Membership' (RCC), <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/results/2/public> [last accessed 2 September 2021].
[29] This reasoning does not take into account border restrictions related to the ongoing pandemic.

remain at odds, complete freedom of movement will be difficult. In this area, the 'Open Balkan' initiative launched in late July 2021 by Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania includes only half of the WB6, whereas all were already committed to developing the CRM, which sets out the same freedoms. Thus it will do little for relations between Serbia and Kosovo, or Montenegro and Serbia, and may risk adding to divisions with those left out.[30]

While both 'Open Balkan' and the EU-backed CRM initiatives have been sold as facilitating freedom of movement, the question is whether there is political will to achieve it. There are also questions as to what the fate of freedom of movement in the WB may be if WB6 countries then accede at different speeds to the EU, potentially triggering new setbacks for movement elsewhere in the region. Nonetheless, an economic cooperation expert we spoke to projected that the economic benefits of removing barriers to facilitate trade and investment in the region could trump other obstacles, particularly given the pressures created by COVID-19: 'as soon as the money talks, internal problems seem to disappear'. Meanwhile, others cited improvements in some bilateral relationships within the WB6, as well as public support for free movement, as further reasons to be optimistic.

The sense of enclosure is particularly acute within Kosovo. While traveling to Serbia is complicated but still possible for Kosovo nationals, travel to Bosnia and Herzegovina from Kosovo is significantly more difficult. When it comes to movement of WB6 citizens within the EU, visa liberalization for Kosovo remains the stumbling block. While the EU largely supports visa liberalization, and some MS implicitly concur without publicly voicing their position, other countries such as France, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Belgium remain opposed. There may be room for pragmatism here too, as with Slovakia, which does not recognize Kosovo but accepts its passport and pragmatically supports visa liberalization.

2.3   Economic cooperation

The agreement of the CRM was made possible by years of investment in regional cooperation[31] – both as a way to overcome the region's problems and a stepping stone towards the EU Single Market. By creating an integrated market of around 18 million people, the CRM aims *inter alia*

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[30] Stojkovski, B, (2021), 'Businesses Eye Boost, But also Barriers, in 'Open Balkan' Initiative', *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/08/30/businesses-eye-boost-but-also-barriers-in-open-balkan-initiative/> [last accessed 2 September 2021].

[31] Under the MAP REA the EC noted that the region had completed all actions in the Regional Economic Area Action plan. (EC (2021), '2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy', (EC) <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/2021-communication-eu-enlargement-policy_en> [last accessed 20 November 2021]). Substantial progress covered the trade area, trade of services, easing of obstacles to mobility, integration of transport and energy systems (EC (2019), '2019 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy', (EC) <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2019-05/20190529-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy_en.pdf> [last accessed 20 November 2021].

to create growth and employment opportunities, increase competitiveness and make the region attractive to foreign investments. Under the CRM Action Plan, the WB6 countries have pledged to produce results tangible to the citizens and companies in the region. Implementing measures revolve around four main pillars: (i) alignment of rules and regulations based on the four freedoms approach, through mutual recognition arrangements, thus facilitating free movement and removing both tariff and non-tariff barriers; (ii) making the region attractive to foreign investments; (iii) integrating the region into the pan-European digital area; and (iv) upgrading the industrial base and innovation infrastructures.[32] Within the first year of the initiative there was progress on several points under these pillars.

The Open Balkan initiative's rationale is to allow some WB countries to progress faster on economic cooperation by bypassing the bilateral disputes that block the path at regional level.[33] With Serbia objecting to Kosovo's removal of UNMIK representation within the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), progress on the CRM has been hamstrung by Kosovo-Serbia relations. The Open Balkan initiative circumvents this by excluding Kosovo and therefore sidestepping the pitfalls of Kosovo-Serbia relations. However, inclusion of only half of the WB6 in the Open Balkan initiative could have negative implications in terms of symbolism and interoperability. Furthermore, it risks supplanting the purpose and concept of the CRM and undermining the BP.

Although the Open Balkan initiative is not necessarily born of disillusionment regarding enlargement issues, leaders involved appear to welcome the idea that they do not have to address European standards within it. The three other WB6 countries remain apprehensive of the idea of joining the initiative. Kosovo explicitly opposed it and provided a counterproposal: the SEFTA (Southeast European Free Trade Agreement).[34] Meanwhile, amid concern that Kosovo may lose the leverage needed to resolve fundamental issues if regional processes simply proceed without reference to its concerns,[35] it continues to be left out of the 'Open Balkan' initiative. Similarly, Bosnia and Herzegovina's leadership has expressed concern that a regional economic zone endangers its independence.[36] Along with Montenegro, both countries officially claimed that they see no reason to prefer the initiative over the CRM.[37]

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[32] RCC, (2020), 'Common Regional Market Action Plan', <https://www.rcc.int/docs/543/common-regional-market-action-plan> [last accessed 16 November 2021].

[33] Bassuener, K, (2021), 'US Focus on Open Balkan Economic Project risks Open Season instead', *Just Security*, <https://www.justsecurity.org/79176/us-focus-on-open-balkan-economic-project-risks-open-season-instead/> [last accessed 18 November 2021].

[34] Author unkwown, (2021), 'Kosovo Dismisses "Visionless Mini Schengen", Urges for Trade Deal with the EU - Exit - Explaining Albania', *Exit News - Explaining Albania*, <https://exit.al/en/2021/07/29/kosovo-dismisses-visionless-mini-schengen-urges-for-trade-deal-with-the-eu/> [last accessed 5 August 2021].

[35] Interview with an RCC official.

[36] Ristić, D, (2021), 'Open Balkan Initiative: Less History, More Business', *European Policy Centre*, <https://cep.org.rs/en/blogs/open-balkan-initiative/> [last accessed 21 November 2021].

[37] Ibid.

The EU still lacks a definitive stance on the Open Balkan initiative. During her visit to the region and at the Brdo EU–WB Summit, President Von der Leyen expressed no more than support in principle for regional initiatives. Two European Commission officials noted that 'any fully inclusive regional cooperation initiative is welcomed. Though, if the initiative, either by design or on purpose, is going to exclude some partners, it will become difficult to support.'

To help liberalise trade, the initiative aims to abolish border crossings and barriers to transit.[38] This is an ambitious goal, because of the technical challenges to be overcome: industrial and agricultural products would need to comply with the same standards across participating countries. Given that Serbia and Montenegro apply EU standards that Albania and North Macedonia are some distance from achieving, this is currently not the case.[39] In addition, removing borders to facilitate cross-border trade and transit implies the establishment of a Customs Union within a designated space. It may not be cost-effective to pursue this ahead of subsequent entry into the EU Single Market,[40] and doing so risks diverting resources and capacity away from more inclusive regional processes. Moreover, although much remains unknown as to how the initiative will progress, there are risks in pursuing a controversial and unproven initiative, and abandoning all the work done within the framework and structures of the BP in doing so.

2.4   Responding to COVID-19 and the 'green lanes' initiative

The 2020-2021 BP Summits took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the crisis required intensified regional and European cooperation and coordination, this was not fully understood from the outset. These circumstances provided a stress test for relations among the WB6, and between them and the EU: not only were the distinct countries unable to handle the situation on their own, but the region as a whole needed significant EU support. Under the Sofia Summit, a Health Ministers' meeting was held to explore and establish a coordinated risk management response. Then at the Berlin Summit, an agreement was reached on digital green certificates to be implemented via the central EU system, to facilitate free movement between the region and the EU. Delivery of vaccines by the EU Vaccine Sharing System was also praised.

The pandemic had multifaceted impacts in the WB.[41] During its early stages, the WB6 and EU MS introduced tighter, and often uncoordinated border measures, which risked hindering vital flows of medical and sanitary goods. Yet the crisis rapidly prompted WB6 leaders to recognise

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[38] Kajosevic, S, "Montenegro Being Urged to Join 'Risky' Open Balkan Initiative: Analyst.". in *Balkan Insight - BIRN*, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/01/18/montenegro-being-urged-to-join-risky-open-balkan-initiative-analyst/> [last accessed 13 May 2022].
[39] Interview with a CEFTA official.
[40] Interview with a CEFTA official.
[41] OECD, (2020), 'The Covid-19 Crisis in the Western Balkans: Economic impact, policy responses and short-term sustainable solutions', (OECD), [last accessed 9 November 2021].

the mutual benefits of rejuvenating economic cooperation, infrastructure modernization and coordination in response. Thus the response to the pandemic had implications for several aspects of the BP, in particular the establishment of Green Lanes, CRM and digitalization.

CEFTA and the Permanent Secretariat of the Transport Community jointly proposed the establishment of so-called 'Green Lanes' to mitigate any potential disruption and facilitate transport and trade of essential goods within the region.[42] During the Sofia Summit, WB6 representatives lauded the Green Lanes initiative, which became operational from April 2020, under the coordination and facilitation of CEFTA, the Transport Community and Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). Doing this was challenging, as it required swift mobilization of numerous branches of government, the private sector and regional mechanisms. Yet by the time of the Berlin Summit, Green Lanes had been extended to all intra-CEFTA crossing points.

After the Green Lanes – widely praised as a successful example of regional cooperation[43] – were set up, the Transport Community and CEFTA recommended a move to ensure the lanes could 'stay forever green' by proposing their integration with the network of neighbouring EU MS.[44] EU interest establishing an integrated system was likewise illustrated by its invitation for WB authorities to join the implementation monitoring tool Galileo Green Lane.[45] Thus the Green Lanes initiative highlighted the often unexploited potential for close regional cooperation, especially in the face of shared crises, and as CEFTA's Director put it, 'changed the perspective'[46] on such cooperation, illustrating the mutual benefits of handing over responsibility to regional institutions where it makes sense to do so. The challenge remains how

[42] CEFTA Secretariat, (2020) 'Joint proposal prepared by the Permanent Secretariat of the Transport Community and the CEFTA Secretariat to facilitate the transport and trade of essential goods within the Western Balkans', <https://www.transport-community.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Joint-TCT-CEFTA-proposal-green-corridors.pdf> [last accessed 9 November 2021].

[43] EC, (2020) 'Upgrading the transport Green Lanes to keep the economy going during the COVID-19 pandemic resurgence', (EC), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:30c69d1a-192c-11eb-b57e-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF> [last accessed 9 November 2021].

[44] CEFTA Secretariat, (2020), 'JOINT PROPOSAL TO ESTABLISH GREEN CORRIDORS/ LANES BETWEEN CEFTA/ WESTERN BALKANS 6 AND THE EU MEMBER STATES Supporting trade and transport facilitation and ensuring fast flow of goods in time of pandemics and beyond', <https://www.transport-community.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/List-of-BCPs-on-EU-WB6-Green-Lanes.pdf> [last accessed 9 November 2021]; *Transport Community*, (2020), 'Actions Plans Road - Road Safety - Rail - Transport Facilitation', <https://www.transport-community.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Transport-Facilitation-Action-Plan.pdf> [last accessed 12 November 2021].

[45] European Global Navigation Satellite Systems Agency, (2020), '"Galileo Green Lane" Solution for the EU Green Lane border crossing implementation monitoring', <https://www.transport-community.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Galileo-Green-Lane-Communication-EN-1.pdf> [last accessed 12 November 2021].

[46] CEFTA, (2021), 'The first year of the green corridors/green lanes implementation', <https://cefta.int/news/the-first-year-of-the-green-cooridors-green-lanes-implementation/> [last accessed 12 November 2021].

to build on such contributions to a positive regional cooperation environment,[47] and sustain them both politically and institutionally.

2.5   Connectivity

Connectivity is a key issue, both for the WB region and within the BP, whose connectivity agenda is outlined on its website as intended to help unite citizens (social component), promote markets (monetary component), and connect governments (decision-making component) across the WB6.[48] To advance this agenda, the BP has generated numerous proposals and schemes in the fields of transportation and infrastructure, economic connectivity, youth cooperation, and synergies among businesses and between WB civil society. Its website also emphasizes its promotion of regional cooperation structures, such as the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), the WB Chambers Investment Forum (WBCIF), and the WB Fund (WBF). Alongside gatherings of top government leaders during annual summits, the BP convenes WB Civil Society Forums, Youth Forums, and Business Forums.[49] The BP thus stimulates multi-level, inclusive dialogue and exchange that extends well beyond the level of top decision-makers.

The 2021 Berlin Summit Chair's conclusion stressed connectivity, noting the expanding railway connections within the WB and with neighbouring EU capitals.[50] At the intersection of connectivity and environmental sustainability, Germany has proposed a night train project connecting Paris to Zagreb via Stuttgart, Munich, Vienna and Budapest.[51] There is significant need for such projects to be extended further into the WB6, where further development of rail and bus connections is an important priority that could deliver significant benefits to the region's mixed populations who could benefit greatly from further means of inter-connection. Providing citizens with the means of transportation to meet one another is an important way to foster regional identity.

2.6   Digital transformation

Digital transformation of the WB has remained an ever-present priority of the regional cooperation agenda. In terms of digital preparedness, WB countries significantly trail behind the

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[47] Charokopos, M, (2021), 'Building Networks of Change in the Western Balkans: Looking Back, Moving Forward' (School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute), p 14, [last accessed 12 November 2021].

[48] Author Unknown, (2021), 'About - The Berlin Process', (Berlin Process), <https://berlinprocess.info/about/> [last accessed 21 December 2021].

[49] Ibid.

[50] Author unknown, (2021) 'Western Balkans Berlin Summit 2021 - CHAIR'S CONCLUSIONS', op cit.

[51] Author unkwown (2020), 'L'Allemagne propose de relancer 8 trains de nuit trans-européens', *Mediapart - Blog 'Oui au train de nuit'*, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/ouiautraindenuit/blog/061220/l-allemagne-propose-de-relancer-8-trains-de-nuit-trans-europeens> [last accessed 14 August 2021].

European benchmarks, with Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia Herzegovina being the worst performers, according to a study commissioned by the European Commission,[52] whose findings have been reiterated elsewhere.[53] If not addressed, this gap will likely hamper the WB's efforts to converge with the EU market economy – whereas progress would boost growth and integration prospects.

During BP summits, initiatives have included the organisation of yearly Western Balkan Digital Summits,[54] the Regional Roaming Agreement which abolished roaming tariffs within the region, the organisation of Balkathon and other relevant strategic documents.[55] In particular, the entry into force of the Roaming Agreement, starting from July 1st, 2021, was praised by all actors,[56] including the European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth. During the last Western Balkan Digital Summit, the RCC Secretary-General put forward an ambitious proposal to create a digital identity system for WB citizens, modelled on EU practice.[57] The Digital Agenda also enjoys the valuable support of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which encourages the increase of digital literacy for all and ICT sector growth.[58] The conditions for further digitalisation are thus promising.

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[52] Tech4i2, Time.lex and Jurjevic, D, (2019), 'Monitoring the Digital Economy and Electronic Communications Services in the Western Balkans and Turkey', (EC), <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/2e0e1320-5118-11e9-a8ed-01aa75ed71a1> [last accessed 16 March 2022].
[53] Bieber F, (2020), 'The Digital Leap. How COVID19 Transformed the Digital Future for the Western Balkans', *Ostausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft e.V. / German Eastern Business Association*.
[54] Last held in Podgorica, 11 - 13 October 2021.
[55] *Memorandum of Understanding on regional interoperability and trust services in the Western Balkans Region* (Author unknown (Regional Cooperation Council), "Regional Cooperation Council | Regional Interoperability and Trust Services - What we do.". in *Rcc.int (Regional Cooperation Council)*, <https://www.rcc.int/working_groups/59/regional-interoperability-and-trust-services> [last accessed 13 May 2022].) which aims to speed up the process of modernisation of public administration, easier access to government services and establishment of effective e-governance; *Memorandum of Understanding on 5G Roadmap for the digital transformation of the Western Balkans region*. Admin, "THE COUNTRIES OF THE WESTERN BALKANS HAVE MADE PROGRESS IN THE FIELD OF DIGITALIZATION.". in Digitalsummitwb6.com (*Government of Montenegro, Ministry of Public Administration, Digital Society and Media*), 2021, <https://digitalsummitwb6.com/news/the-countries-of-the-western-balkans-have-made-progress-in-the-field-of-digitalization-76256> [last accessed 13 May 2022].
[56] Author unknown, (2021), 'The Regional Roaming Agreement – A success story that the Western Balkan needs', *European Western Balkans*, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/07/04/the-regional-roaming-agreement-a-success-story-that-the-western-balkan-needs/> [last accessed 12 November 2021].
[57] Regional Cooperation Council, (2021) 'Bregu proposes creation of 'Digital Identity' system for Western Balkan citizens, modelled on the EU one', (RCC) <https://www.rcc.int/news/730/bregu-proposes-creation-of-digital-identity-system-for-western-balkan-citizens-modelled-on-the-eu-one> [last accessed 12 November 2021].
[58] OECD, (2021) 'Competitiveness in South East Europe 2021: A Policy Outlook, Competitiveness and Private Sector Development', (OECD), <https://doi.org/10.1787/dcbc2ea9-en> [last accessed 14 November 2021].

The COVID-19 pandemic has further encouraged use of digital tools and dependence on digital services to access public life.[59] Thus WB citizens are better prepared and eager to embrace and accommodate the digital transformation. Yet more progress is needed. While digital transformation has been a cornerstone of the work of regional structures such as the RCC, it does not feature as prominently in national platforms, particularly in terms of social digital inclusion, governance and trust.

2.7 Addressing insecurity, crime and terror threats

Although security challenges in the WB are not currently severe, challenges remain. On average, 40 percent of WB people consider the security situation in their country to be unsatisfactory.[60] Half the population feels either threatened or very threatened by firearms in their neighbourhood.[61] Of greater concern is the region's vulnerability to serious and organised crime (SOC), which features significant levels of cannabis, heroin and human trafficking alongside trade in counterfeit goods, corruption and tax evasion.[62] While it may preoccupy the EU and MS in the context of enlargement, aside from the need to deal successfully with potentially dangerous returnees from violent Islamist groups overseas,[63] terrorism does not pose an immediate challenge within the WB region. Indeed it is largely 'reactionary elements in Banja Luka, Belgrade and Moscow' who are prepared to 'reframe the Muslim population of the Balkans as an extremist threat'.[64] Although the next generation of WB people may eventually find solace in violent political and/or religious causes if exposed to renewed conflict, repression and disillusionment, the greatest current risks of political violence and insecurity relate more to the rising nationalism and hateful rhetoric tied to democratic decline and state capture by authoritarian elites, who at times maintain close ties to organized crime.

In the WB as in the EU, economic cooperation comes easier than action on political issues. WB6 governments are readier to embrace economic development reforms than tackling politically

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[59] Bieber, F (2020), 'The Digital Leap', op cit.

[60] International Republican Institute, (2020) 'Western Balkans Poll Shows Strong Support for EU', (IRI). Similarly, according to Balkan Barometer, one in two people in the region feels insecure (with people in BiH feeling the most insecure). RCC, (2021) 'Balkan Barometer 2021 Public Opinion Analytical Report' (RCC), p.15.

[61] RCC, (2021) 'Balkan Barometer 2021', op cit, p.39.

[62] See Kemp W, et al, (2021) 'Spot Prices: Analyzing flows of people, drugs and money in the Western Balkans', (Global Initiative on Transnational Organised Crime).

[63] See for example: Author unknown, (2019), 'Guerre en Syrie : la Bosnie-Herzégovine rapatrie 25 de ses ressortissants', *Le Courrier des Balkans*, <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/Guerre-en-Syrie-Bosnie-rapatrie-25-ressortissants> [last accessed 22 July 2021]. Kamberi, B, (2021), 'Le Kosovo et la Macédoine du Nord rapatrient des ressortissants de Syrie', *Le Courrier des Balkans*, <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/Kosovo-rapatriement-kosovar-Syrie> [last accessed 22 July 2021].

[64] Mujanović, J, (2018), *Hunger and fury – the crisis of democracy in the Western Balkans*, (Hurst), p 124.

sensitive issues such as corruption, state capture,[65] illicit finance,[66] or security. As a consequence, BP contributions in this area have been relatively modest. Although the security dimension is yet to deliver notable achievements, it has become increasingly prominent.[67] Despite this, although security policy may come more into focus in the BP in future,[68] for now it is largely covered for the purpose of awareness-raising.[69] The London Summit emphasized security as a key agenda point,[70] and the BP has a steering group on security commitments. At its third meeting in Sofia, WB6 Interior Ministers launched an Illicit Finance and Anti-Corruption Roadmap to improve implementation of existing illicit finance and anti-corruption measures in a small number of shared priority areas.[71] At the Berlin Summit this was followed by the adoption of a Roadmap for a sustainable solution to the illegal possession, misuse, and trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons and their ammunition in the Western Balkans by 2024.[72]

Regarding the question of how to handle foreign fighters detained and repatriated overseas, according to one interviewee the situation had become less critical over the past two years. Another attributed this to smooth intergovernmental cooperation between most WB6 governments and third actors tackling this challenge. According to a third interviewee, the issue of WB6 citizens, whether present or repatriated from Syria, is unlikely to be a sticking point in

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[65] Zúñiga, N, (2020) 'Examining State Capture: Undue Influence on Law-Making and the Judiciary in the Western Balkans and Turkey', *Transparency International*, <https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/2020_Report_ExaminingStateCapture_English.pdf> [last accessed 15 November 2021].
[66] Reitano, T, Amerhauser, K, (2020), 'Illicit Financial Flows In Albania, Kosovo And North Macedonia Key Drivers And Current Trends', (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime), <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/IFFs-Balkans-English-WEB-Nov2020-1.pdf> [last accessed 15 November 2021].
[67] Klemenc, J, Boštjančič Pulko, I, (2018), 'The Berlin Process as an Actor in Internal Security and Counter-Terrorism: Opportunities and Pitfalls', *European Fund for the Balkans*. EU MS are interested in monitoring the situation in the Western Balkans region in terms of trends of organized crime, violent extremism and financing of terrorism. Moreover, according ot one interviewee, security is the main reason why the UK is still invested in the BP.
[68] Group of authors, (2018), 'How can the Berlin Process add a new boost to regional internal security and counter-terrorism?', *European Western Balkans*, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/07/19/can-berlin-process-add-new-boost-regional-internal-security-counter-terrorism/> [last accessed 15 November 2021].
[69] Markiewicz, M, (2021), 'The Berlin Process initiative and its ability to help its Western Balkan member states with countering the rise of extremism', *GLOBSEC*.
[70] Drosopulos, M, et al, (2020), op cit, p 13.
[71] UNODC, (2021), 'Regional Anti-Corruption and Illicit Finance RoadMap for the Western Balkans Jurisdictions', (UNODC/Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative), <https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeasterneurope//AC_and_Illicit_Finance_Roadmap_Full_25.06_PDF.pdf> [last accessed 17 November 2021].
[72] Author unknown, (2021), 'Roadmap for a sustainable solution to the illegal possession, misuse and trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALW) and their ammunition in the Western Balkans by 2024'. *The South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons*, <https://www.seesac.org/f/docs/publications-salw-control-roadmap/Regional-Roadmap-for-a-sustainable-solution-to-the.pdf> [last accessed 17 November 2021].

negotiations with the EU, as several Western European countries are also facing the same challenge. However, concerns may be heightened following the involvement of an Austrian and North Macedonian dual-citizen in a terror attack in Vienna in 2020.[73]

In response to growing concerns over divisive ethno-nationalism and attacks on free media, the European Parliament has stressed 'the significance of ensuring media freedom and promoting quality journalism and media literacy for tackling widespread disinformation, fake news, nationalist rhetoric and hate speech', and 'called for the creation of a Balkan-focused Centre of Excellence to counter disinformation.'[74]

2.8   Anti-corruption

Open Society Foundations estimate that out of an average of €7 billion spent across the WB6 on public procurement per year, €2 billion disappears due to corruption.[75] In 2021, Balkan Barometer reported diminishing public confidence in the rule of law: a 'large majority thinks that the law is not applied effectively (58%) or equally (68%, 8% more than in 2019).[76] These trends have been echoed by European Western Balkans and Transparency International.[77]

Several interviewees pointed to the scale of the challenge posed by corruption in the region, its connections to organized crime and democratic backsliding, and the significant room for improvement in countering it. For one interviewee, the need to prioritise the rule of law is underlined by the EU's negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia. Under the new methodology advanced by French President Emmanuel Macron, Chapters 23 and 24 both constitute the first agenda item within EU accession negotiations and will be the last to be closed. Moreover, an unfavourable development can cause the process to be halted and even reversed.

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[73] Jakov Marusic, S, (2020), 'North Macedonia Shaken by Compatriots' Links to Vienna Attack', *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/11/04/north-macedonia-shaken-by-compatriots-links-to-vienna-attack/> [last accessed 9 August 2021].

[74] Kyuchyuk, I, (2021) 'REPORT on the 2019-2020 Commission Reports on North Macedonia', (Europarl.europa.eu), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0040_EN.html> [last accessed 6 August 2021].

[75] Kemp, W, et al, (2021), 'Spot Prices', op cit, p.49.

[76] RCC, (2021) 'Balkan Barometer 2021', op cit, p.17.

[77] Cuckić, N, (2021), 'Transparency International: Corruption is on the rise in the Western Balkans - European Western Balkans', *European Western Balkans*, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/02/04/transparency-international-corruption-is-on-the-rise-in-the-western-balkans/> [last accessed between July and September 2021]. EWB reported in an article written by Nikola Cuckić that the WB6 Public sector turned out to be more corrupted in 2020 in contrast to 2019, as per specialists and corporate individuals. released in early 2021 bIn 2016, in TI's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), the WB6 had an overall rating of 39.8 points, whereas in 2020, it declined to 37.5 points based on the index, where 100 points indicate a 'zero corruption' public sphere and 0 points represent 'entirely corrupt'.

The 2020 EU progress reports detected limited progress across WB6 countries except for Albania and North Macedonia. While the EC stresses that these two countries have passed progressive legislation, related prosecutions still remain to be seen. Furthermore, according to the EC, prosecutions are limited to low-level corruption: as another interviewee observed, 'big fish' face trial when they lose favour among decision-makers, which reinforces the corrupt culture of patronage and impunity for loyalists. This illustrates the paramount importance of political will if technical performance is to improve among judiciaries, prosecutors, and police.

Overall therefore, as one researcher explained to us, anti-corruption initiatives risk remaining 'highly declaratory' with simulated reforms thinly veiling a deteriorating reality. EU conditionality, support, and money are all proving insufficient to stimulate genuine anti-corruption efforts in the WB6. Reversing state capture depends on far-reaching reforms in sensitive areas, and financial incentives are not strong enough to bring this about. To tackle corruption, the EU and its MS thus need to orient themselves more towards supporting civil society and social movements to demand for the changes needed – building on but going well beyond initiatives like the BP's CSO forum.

2.9   Civil society organizations

Although CSOs, think tanks and activist organizations were, at first, somewhat overlooked in the BP's design, today the civil society sector has established a meaningful role in the regional processes. Formerly highly fragmented, the sector is now a more coherent force pushing for progress within the BP and wider accession processes.[78]

Its role was first explicitly recognized in the 2015 Vienna Summit, which welcomed the convening of a civil society segment on its margins. In the run up to the 2018 London Summit, CSOs involved in shaping the summit took the initiative to establish a structured regional civil society platform to monitor the BP, ensure accountability and produce shadow reports.[79] Civil society, think tanks and activist organizations now meet annually, together with WB6 governments, on the margins of BP summits to scrutinise developments and outcomes.[80] Beyond the summits themselves, civil society plays an ongoing role in consulting, engaging the wider public in policy debates, and formulating policy proposals and recommendations.[81]

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[78] Marković, Z, (2019), 'Self-Organising for Regional Impact: A Meeting of a the Civil Society Platform For Democracy and Human Rights', in *Humanity in Action*,
<https://www.humanityinaction.org/news_item/self-organizing-for-regional-impact-a-meeting-of-a-the-civil-society-platform-for-democracy-and-human-rights/> [last accessed 12 December 2021].
[79] https://civilsocietyplatform.org/about-us/
[80] Ana Marjanović Rudan, (2018), 'The Berlin Process in a Nutshell', (GIZ).
[81] Civil Society & Think Tank Forum's working groups, (2021), 'Policy Recommendations Based on the work of ten working groups during the Civil Society & Think Tank Forum', (Aspen Institute Germany and Southeast Europe Association), <https://wb-csf.eu/docs/Final-Recommendations-CSF2021.pdf.pdf> [last accessed 18 November 2021].

Considering the absence of formal monitoring and evaluation mechanisms within the BP, CSO and thinktank efforts to analyse implementation and suggest improvements adds significant value.[82]

Nonetheless, civil society appears to be better accommodated in the BP by EU institutions and MS than by national governments.[83] There is scope to further institutionalise the role of civil society within the BP. At the same time there is a risk that if momentum on European integration continues to ebb, the energy and enthusiasm that led CSOs to mobilise around the BP could subside.

It has long been under-recognised that 'the region is a vibrant space of social and political contestation in which substantive democratization processes are just beginning'.[84] In Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia watchdogs provide the only functional political opposition. Yet despite their fundamental role in peace and democratization processes, CSOs currently face numerous challenges in the WB, such as the enhanced controls brought in by Albania and Serbia governments, and more needs to be done to safeguard their independence from political manipulation, including through sustained funding.[85]

Within the BP, connections and exchanges between civil society and think tank representatives and EU and WB6 officials and leaders could be further enhanced, including through greater access for CSO representatives to the highest levels of discussion and the involvement of CSOs within the co-chairing mechanism.[86]

2.10 Reconciliation

According to Balkan Barometer,[87] a vast majority of the WB population supports regional cooperation in its role in improving the political, economic and security situation in their home countries. However, as one interviewee explained, to unleash the full potential of regional cooperation, further tangible benefits are needed for citizens, and such benefits will only become less meagre when gains are less hostage to volatile political relationships. 'There will be

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[82] Ardian Hackaj, Gentiola Madhi, Krisela Hackaj, (2017) 'Monitoring the Berlin Process: From Paris to Trieste', *Cooperation and Development Institute*, <https://www.connectwitheu.al/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Monitoring-the-Berlin-Process-From-Paris-to-Trieste.pdf> [last accessed 12 December 2021].

[83] Unfortunately, this was the experience of this research too, as national officials were more reluctant to have a conversation than their regional/European counterparts.

[84] Mujanović, J, *Hunger and fury*, op cit, p.3 – and see pp 76, 82 on Western failures to recognise, work with past social movements.

[85] Interviews with economic and development experts.

[86] At the Berlin summit, although CSO representatives gained an audience with WB6 foreign ministers and officials within the German chancellery, they were not included in sessions involving other top decision-makers.

[87] ACIT and EPIK Institute, (2021), 'Balkan Barometer Public Opinion Analytical report', (RCC).

more benefits when you have a process that is self-sustainable, rather than one where constant adoption of documents is needed to be done by the parties'.[88] As another interviewee asserted, 'to increase reconciliation, we need more regional cooperation. The former is just a happy by-product of the latter. Not the reverse'. Thus across the WB, progress in all other sectors of cooperation is tied to reconciliation.

Advancing reconciliation and good neighbourly relations have been central to the BP since 2014.[89] At the 2018 London Summit, pledges were made regarding three main components: (i) Regional Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations; (ii) Missing Persons; and (iii) War Crimes.[90] In addition to promoting regular dialogue among WB leaders, it has involved engagement with the Regional Commission for the Establishment of the Facts about the War Crimes and other Violations of Human Rights Committed in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia (RECOM). RECOM was developed by a pan-regional CSO coalition from 2008, and has since accrued considerable public support.[91]

Yet, despite its strategic importance and place on the political agenda, progress has remained elusive given the lack of a clear long term strategy and methodology dealing with root causes related to history, memory, and trauma.[92] The level of priority attached to reconciliation has varied with the preferences of BP summit hosts, further undermining continuity. Most WB governments have failed to buy formally into the RECOM initiative, and interviewees raised concerns over the increasing willingness of leaders to play on divisive historical narratives to build support (especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and in Montenegro), the social divides cemented by the absence of an educational approach that equips young people in the region to learn about and deal with the region's troubled recent past.[93] While Republika Srpska's refusal to recognise the Srebrenica genocide has been the most flagrant provocation,[94] many WB leaders appear adept at playing both sides: highlighting external enemies to maintain

[88] Interview with the CEFTA official.
[89] Author unknown, (2017), 'Final Declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans', Berlin Process Information and Resource Center, <https://berlinprocess.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Final-Declaration-by-the-Chair-of-the-Conference-on-the-Western-Balkans.pdf> [last accessed 16 November 2021].
[90] Western Balkans Summit London, (2018), 'Joint Declaration on Regional Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations in the Framework of the Berlin Process', *Berlin Process Information and Resource Center*, <https://berlinprocess.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Joint-Declarations-signed-at-the-Leaders-Meeting-of-the-Western-Balkans-Summit-by-Berlin-Process-participants.pdf> [last accessed 15 November 2021].
[91] RECOM, (2017), 'Reconciliation thorugh the Berlin Process: the role of RECOM', (RECOM), November, <https://recom.link/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Policy-Brief-Reconciliation-through-the-Berlin-Process-the-Role-of-RECOM-ff_24.11.2017.pdf> [last accessed 11 March 2022].
[92] Drosopulos, M, et al, (2020), op cit.
[93] Interviews with researcher, development expert and economic expert.
[94] Cateux, A, (2021), 'Bosnie-Herzégovine: un rapport révisionniste sur le génocide de Srebrenica', *Le Courrier des Balkans*, <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/Bosnie-Herzegovine-rapport-revisionniste-sur-srebrenica> [last accessed 23 July 2021].

political popularity at home, while abandoning such rhetoric within the earshot of EU officials – who often seem all too willing to ignore the discrepancy.[95]

In this context, even if accession incentives and regional processes remain important instruments for promoting progress, EU-mediated dialogue has achieved only modest progress towards a conclusive agreement between Kosovo and Serbia. In spite of the impasse at higher levels, it is possible to promote inter-community dialogue at other levels.[96] Thanks to foreign support many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) work on reconciliation in the WB6, despite states' limited support (or active hindrance).

While building paths to reconciliation via people-to-people efforts, civil society pressure for justice and by using accession incentives to foster cooperation and interdependence is valid and worthwhile, at present the end goal feels ever more elusive. Regional structures and mechanisms are today far from producing enduring solutions to potential conflicts in the region, and lack the mandate to mediate and facilitate resolution. With the region remaining dependent on external interventions to solve political divisions,[97] problems and risks remain entrenched.

2.11 Youth policy and youthwork

As interviewees consistently pointed out, youth issues and youthwork have huge cross-cutting significance for all those working to advance peace and development across the WB6. This is particularly critical given the challenge posed by brain drain across the WB, an issue compounded by the underfunding of education and young people's exclusion from decision-making, socio-economic marginalization and unemployment, and mistrust of authorities and propaganda amid the unresolved legacy of past wars.[98] Neglect for education during the COVID-19 pandemic may also have led many young people to feel further abandoned.[99]

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[95] Interview with researcher.
[96] Cvetković, S, Radić, N, (translation), (2021), 'Kosovo: à Pristina, des voisins albanais et serbes qui ne veulent pas se quitter' (original title: 'Leposava i Aferdita ne žele razdvajanje ni posle iseljenja iz baraka u Prištini'), *Radio Slobodna Evropa - Le Courrier des Balkans*, <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/Kosovo-pristina-voisins-albanais-et-serbes> [last accessed 14 August 2021].
[97] Robin Emmott, (2021) 'Kosovo, Serbia agree deal to end border tensions', *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kosovo-serbia-agree-deal-end-border-tensions-2021-09-30/> [last accessed 17 November 2021].
[98] See also: Mušić, S, (2020), 'Stereotipi i predrasude nad glavama mladih na Balkanu', *Al Jazeera*, 10 Feb, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2020/2/10/stereotipi-i-predrasude-nad-glavama-mladih-na-balkanu>; UNDP, (2012), 'Youth Unemployment in Bosnia and Herzegovina: How much rejection can you take?', (UNDP); UNFPA, Promente, IPSOS, (2021) 'Survey on Youth Emigration in Bosnia and Hercegovina: A Research Report', August, which documents motivations to escape social and political insecurities, prospects of long-lasting unemployment or underemployment, the lack of or insufficient access to learning or job opportunities, and the lack of relevant policies, social services and/or security programmes that specifically target the needs of young people; on unemployment as young people's greatest challenge see RCC, (2021), 'Balkan Barometer 2021', op cit, p.31.
[99] Interview with economic expert.

For some of those consulted, brain drain appeared to be one inevitable downside of further EU integration, although the eventual return migration of Polish nationals who had left their country offers grounds for hope.

In general, the antidote to these trends would be an approach to governing that fosters a greater sense of belonging and optimism through being centred on delivering public goods to citizens – something some experts feel that existing national youth policies fail to do,[100] but that the BP is well attuned towards encouraging. At the Sofia Summit, WB6 governments endorsed the Agenda for the WB on Innovation, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport,[101] initially announced and compiled by the EC[102] and officially launched at the 2021 EU-WB Brdo Summit.[103] The agenda aims to cultivate academic and scientific excellence, generate opportunities for young people and reform the education systems of WB countries.

Another important output of the Sofia Summit was the idea of a Youth Guarantee for the Western Balkans. This follows the blueprint of the EU Youth Guarantee and is thus another area in which the region intends ambitiously to keep pace with the EU.[104] The Youth Guarantee is intended to be supported by the Economic and Investment Plan as a key flagship initiative. It aims to support young persons who are not employed, in education or training by providing a good quality offer of employment, traineeship, apprenticeship, or continued education within four months of leaving school or becoming unemployed. The RCC, as the implementing body, has been strongly pushing for the Youth Guarantee,[105] and has launched a valuable study on youth employment in the Western Balkans[106] which serves as a baseline to conceptualise further interventions.

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[100] Interview with local government expert.

[101] Author unknown, (2020) 'Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport', Ministerial Meeting of the Western Balkans Platforms, <https://wb-ministerial.tw.events/docs/WB-Agenda-v4.pdf> [last accessed 15 November 2021].

[102] EC, (2021), 'A Western Balkan Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport', (EC) <https://wb-ministerial.tw.events/docs/WesternBalkansAgenda_Factsheet_May2021.pdf>.

[103] European Council, (2021), 'Brdo Declaration', 6 October, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/52280/brdo-declaration-6-october-2021-en.pdf> [last accessed 15 November 2021].

[104] European Council, (2020), 'COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 30 October 2020 on A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee and replacing the Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee', Official Journal of the European Union, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020H1104(01)&from=EN> [last accessed 20 November 2021].

[105] RCC, (2021) 'Leaflet: Youth Guarantee in Western Balkans', (RCC), <https://www.rcc.int/docs/575/leaflet-youth-guarantee-in-western-balkans> [last accessed 16 November 2021].

[106] RCC, (2021), 'Study on Youth Employment in the Western Balkans', (RCC), <https://www.rcc.int/docs/573/study-on-youth-employment-in-the-western-balkans> [last accessed 20 November 2021].

The Berlin Summit followed this by introducing several notable initiatives, including the School Exchange Scheme, the Western Balkans Youth Forum 2021 and the Regional Youth Agenda. It remains too early to assess implementation of this agenda, but the concepts appear promising. A consultant we interviewed praised the impact of the BP's close collaboration with youth and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) initiative.

A 'better region starting with youth': the work of RYCO
RYCO is an initiative, established by an agreement of the WB6 Prime Ministers at the Paris summit in July 2016, to promote reconciliation, trust, cooperation, and dialogue across the WB through supporting and funding projects that bring young people together. Examples of recent and upcoming RYCO initiatives include the ROUTE WB6 programme (2019-21) which supports volunteer work by young people,[107] and a WB6 School Exchange Program planned for 2020-2024.[108] RYCO is also addressing reconciliation issues by enabling young people to reflect on these topics.[109]

Several interviewees shared positive impressions of RYCO for involving young people in political dialogue, helping foster a sense of regional belonging and supporting reconciliation. Yet most also stressed the need for it to go further, with greater resources, to confront the huge brain drain, reconciliation and youth enfranchisement challenges that remain. In the process, as one interviewee stressed, RYCO needs to be protected from any attempt by governments to instrumentalise it, and young people could benefit from being offered more opportunity to engage with top level decision-makers (following the precedent set by the Slovak–Czech–Austrian format).

Not all youth initiatives were seen as unequivocally positive by research participants. For one interviewee, university exchange programmes are continuing to feed into brain drain, as a

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[107] The general purpose of ROUTE WB6, an initiative monetarily backed up by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is officially described on RYCO's website: The point is to encourage long-standing and short-range volunteering as an asset that will play a role in reducing ethnic and community-based barriers between WB6 Youth, also to foster their European and community-based principles that will result in reconciliation, stabilization, and a flourishing WB6 region. The formal presentation also states that this initiative is intended to allow WB6 Youth to implement European principles, trigger and direct exchange of ideas across cultures, as well as territorial cooperation in favor of a growth encompassing democratic, social, and economic issues. *RYCO*, (2021), 'ROUTE WB6' (RYCO), <https://www.rycowb.org/?page_id=7813> [last accessed 11 August 2021].
[108] This initiative is officially presented as postulating that the pasts of the WB6 countries are tightly entangled and that they are facing the same existing issues. Nonetheless, established preconceptions and lack of forbearance for other communities throughout the WB6 are yet prevalent. The official presentation then looks forward by assuming that improvement can only be accomplished via acting cooperatively to nurture forbearance, team spirit, and collective action at the regional level. - Radunović, D, (2021), 'Youth exchanges in the Western Balkans (GIZ - RYCO)' (GIZ), <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/94980.html> [last accessed 13 August 2021].
[109] RYCO, (2021), 'RYCO and Epoka University in Albania Organize Youth for Reconciliation Thinkathon', (RYCO), <https://www.rycowb.org/?p=11037> [last accessed 5 August 2021].

significant number of WB students who participate in these programs then choose to work outside the region. As another interviewee observed, professional training opportunities provided by some EU MS that lead to employment outside the WB have a similar effect. The BP could thus valuably encourage youth mobility within the WB6 and attract more students from outside the WB to study in the region.[110] Another concept that could foster a sense of belonging would be a WB6-specific Erasmus programme.

2.12 Roma Integration

The BP has been valuable in raising the issue of integration of the Roma community – the largest ethnic minority in Europe, as well as one of the most deprived and socially excluded groups.[111] In the WB, Roma encounter insurmountable barriers to their participation in public life and are unable to exercise their full civil and political rights.[112] Many lack the benefits of citizenship,[113] and thus are unable to participate in democratic processes including elections. Within the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnic minorities cannot stand for election to the Presidency and the House of the Peoples.[114] Regional and national policy measures are needed to allow the Roma minority to access public services such as education, labour markets, healthcare and housing freely, as well as to overcome political, institutional and social discrimination.[115] On this topic, the most important development within the Berlin Process is the signing in Poznań of the Declaration of Western Balkan Partners on Roma Integration within the Enlargement Process.[116] The Sofia and Berlin Summits have made little headway, but have built

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[110] See also: RYCO, (2021), 'Western Balkan Youth Forum: Young People Create Regional Youth Agenda', (RYCO), <https://www.rycowb.org/?p=10806> [last accessed 30 July 2021]. See also: *France and the Western Balkans: Investments, diplomacy, and strategic cooperation* (webinar), 8 June 2021 <https://www.facebook.com/events/3084898781831563>.

[111] Robayo-Abril, M, Millan, N, (2019) 'Breaking the Cycle of Roma Exclusion in the Western Balkans', (World Bank Group).

[112] RCC, (2021), 'Bregu: Discrimination against Roma remaings very high, and we have to take actions to reduce and prevent it', (RCC), <https://www.rcc.int/news/713/bregu-discrimination-against-roma-remains-very-high-and-we-have-to-take-actions-to-reduce-and-prevent-it> [last accessed 12 December 2021].

[113] Civil Rights Defenders, (2017) 'The Wall of Anti-Gypsyism - Roma in the Western Balkans', (Civil Rights Defenders), <https://crd.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/The-Wall-of-Anti-Gypsyism-Roma-in-Western-Balkans.pdf> [last accessed 12 December 2021].

[114] So far, the country has failed to comply with the 2009 ECHR judgement ('Sejdić and Finci v. Bosnia Herzegovina', no. 27996/06 and 34836/06, (ECHR)) requesting for the proper constitutional and legislative arrangements to be implemented. See also Council of Europe, (2019), 'Sejdić and Finci - After 10 years of absence of progress, new hopes for a solution for the 2022 elections' (Council of Europe), <https://www.coe.int/en/web/execution/-/sejdic-and-finci-after10-years-of-absence-of-progress-new-hopes-for-a-solution-for-the-2022-elections> [last accessed 25 November 2021].

[115] Stephan Müller, (2019), 'Roma in the Western Balkans: A Radical Shift in Policy is needed', *Peace Lab*, <https://peacelab.blog/2019/12/roma-in-the-western-balkans-a-radical-shift-in-policy-is-needed> [last accessed 12 December 2021].

[116] RCC/Roma Integration, (2021), 'Declaration of Western Balkans Partners on Roma Integration within the EU Enlargement', (RCC),

on the Poznań Declaration by holding yearly Ministerial Meetings on Roma Integration,[117] first in Tirana in 2020 and later in Sarajevo in 2021. During the summits, the Western Balkan Investment Framework was also recognized as a possible tool to support integration measures, such as social housing schemes for vulnerable groups, including Roma. There is at present a fairly clear framework, which has produced some follow-up mechanisms and enjoys some enabling political will and sufficient finance. Given all this, BP work on Roma integration appears encouraging if kept in focus.

2.13 Environmental issues

During the Sofia Summit, the WB6 approved the WB Green Agenda, aimed at supporting the sustainable long-term green socio-economic recovery of the region, seeking for instance to achieve climate neutrality by 2050.[118] Most interviewees assessed the WB6 Green Agenda very positively. However, although WB citizens appear eager to join the EU in addressing climate challenges in line with the European Green Deal, capitalizing on such enthusiasm at political level is not straightforward. As an EU official commented, 'getting the leaders of the region to sign on anything has become increasingly hard over the years', and therefore building from the initial adoption of the Green Agenda towards implementation would require significant further progress.

Nonetheless, there has been considerable momentum on this agenda: the announcement of the Green Agenda was followed in October 2020 by EC Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.[119] This document outlined five main pillars: (i) climate action, including decarbonisation, energy and mobility, (ii) circular economy, addressing in particular waste, recycling, sustainable production and efficient use of resources, (iii) biodiversity, aiming to protect and restore the natural wealth of the region, (iv) fighting pollution of air, water and soil and (v) sustainable food systems and rural areas. [120] It also identified ten flagship investments[121] to assist in the modernisation of WB infrastructure, underpinned with significant resources from the EC's Economic and Investment Plan and the

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<https://www.rcc.int/romaintegration2020/files/admin/docs/3c105cda9e6e62eb1a6cdab7968f77f5.pdf> [last accessed 14 November 2021].

[117] RCC/Roma Integration, (2020), 'Conclusions of the Ministerial Meeting on Roma Integration', (RCC) 27 Oct; RCC/Roma Integration, (2021), 'Conclusions of the Second Ministerial Meeting on Roma Integration', (RCC), 30 June.

[118] Jakov Marusic, S, (2020) 'Balkan Leaders Adopt Plan for Common Regional Market', *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/11/10/balkan-leaders-adopt-plan-for-common-regional-market/> [last accessed 29 July 2021].

[119] EC, (2020), 'Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans', (COM(2020) 641 final), 6 Oct, <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/green_agenda_for_the_western_balkans_en.pdf> [last accessed 14 March 2022].

[120] Ibid, p.2-14

[121] Infrastructure projects regarding renewable energy, transition from coal, renovation wave, waste and wastewater management.

Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III).[122] Then, in October 2021, in the context of the EU-WB summit in Slovenia the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans 2021-2030, has been published.[123]

The Green Agenda requires new models that combine respect for the planet with economic development, with enormous implications for the WB and the daily lives of its citizens. Numerous WB6 CSOs are actively engaging with the Green Agenda and promoting beneficial solutions to the challenges it presents. For instance, in a set of briefs published by The Balkan Forum and a Forum Talk co-organized by the Council of Europe,[124] the 'circular economy' concept was further elaborated. Nonetheless, some in civil society have raised concerns that thus far, despite the progressive nature of the Green Agenda, rushed and limited consultation of civil society has weakened its ambition and quality.[125] In response to the action plan, CSOs raised concerns over the lack of a concrete timeline which would allow for proper implementation, assessment, monitoring and evaluation,[126] and noted that some of the commitments in the draft action plan were watered down in the final version following the negotiations.[127]

Despite the policy progress, much now depends on how quickly commitments can be translated into action. Here, the strength of WB6 governments' commitments remains open to question – especially given the complexity of the impact green adaptation will have on WB economies and labour markets. It likewise remains to be seen how the EU's geopolitical rivals may respond to – and seek to undermine – an agenda closely tied to the EU's vision for the region's future. There has been a small delay in the implementation of IPA III funds,[128] a considerable portion of

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[122] EC, (2020) 'An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans', (SWD(2020) 223 final), (EC).
[123] RCC, (2021), 'Action Plan For The Implementation Of The Sofia Declaration On The Green Agenda For The Western Balkans 2021-2030', 4 Oct. <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/GAWB-ACTION-PLAN-Final-04.10.2021.pdf> [last accessed 14 March 2022].
[124] World Forum for Democracy, Council of Europe, The Balkan Forum, (2021), 'Forum Talk: Circularity is a Virtue - An introduction to Circular Economy and field perspectives from the Western Balkan region', (WFD) 26 July, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/world-forum-democracy/forum-talk-26-july-2021> [last accessed 13 August 2021].
[125] Gallop, P, (2021), 'The Western Balkans Green Agenda Action Plan: Quantity over quality', *CEE Bankwatch*, 8 Oct, < https://bankwatch.org/blog/the-western-balkans-green-agenda-action-plan-quantity-over-quality> [last accessed 14 March 2022].
[126] Association Biom et al, (2021) 'For attention of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the European Commission on the Draft Action Plan for the Implementation of the Sofia Declaration', (BankWatch), <https://bankwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NGO-letter-on-the-draft-action-plan-for-the-implementation-of-the-Sofia-Declaration-.pdf> [last accessed 14 November 2021].
[127] Gallop, P, (2021), 'The Western Balkans Green Agenda Action Plan: Quantity over quality', (BankWatch), <https://bankwatch.org/blog/the-western-balkans-green-agenda-action-plan-quantity-over-quality> [last accessed 15 November 2021].
[128] EC, (2021), 'Press corner: European Commission welcomes political agreement on new €14.2 billion Pre-Accession Assistance Instrument (IPA III)', (EC), <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_2810> [last accessed 9 August 2021].

which is allocated to environmental issues. There is also concern about whether infrastructural investments will prove sufficient, and the impact inflation could have on how far allocated resources stretch.

3 Conclusion: the future of the Berlin Process

The BP is widely praised for its role in taking regional cooperation to an unprecedented level.[129] It is doing so at a critical time, when the sustainability of peace, reconciliation and democratisation processes set in motion after the wars of the '90s has come under severe strain and ethno-nationalist forces and external authoritarian influences have increasingly jeopardised the Euro-Atlantic trajectory of the WB. Nonetheless, through an evolving vision for the WB and firm leadership on a political level, the platform has intensified interactions among WB6 and EU countries. Numerous initiatives under its auspices have increasingly transposed responsibility and ownership to the WB, while maintaining the incentive of EU and MS support. In time, the scope and approach of the BP have intertwined with EU Enlargement policy. Sustainable progress is evident in some key areas, most notably with the CRM and the Green Agenda.

Yet enlargement process setbacks have undermined a key aspect of the BP: rapprochement with the EU. This uncertainty has made it harder for the BP to promote integration, with the ultimate goal of taking the WB into the EU.[130] As an RCC official told us, as with other regional initiatives, the BP risks remaining somewhat distant from the people of the WB, lacking consolidated vision and slowly getting relegated into irrelevance as recycled pledges take growing precedence over concrete results.

Over the last two Summits, no less than during earlier years, technical commitments have been easier to secure than those requiring real political commitment. As an EU official told us, in future regional structures with EC support are likely to keep 'looking to conclude on iconic policies of a similar nature with the Roaming Agreement, i.e. free movement with ID, or recognition of regional diplomas'. Deepening such technical cooperation could well prove a stepping stone towards deeper regional cooperation.

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[129] This was the the prevailing view in most interviews conducted. For a summary of the achievements related to the Berlin Process see: European Investment Bank, (2021), 'EIB President Werner Hoyer lauds achievements of the Berlin Process and reaffirms increased EIB support for the Western Balkans', (EIB) <https://www.eib.org/en/press/all/2021-248-eib-president-werner-hoyer-lauds-achievements-of-the-berlin-process-and-reaffirms-increased-eib-support-for-the-western-balkans> [last accessed 17 November 2021].

[130] Odeta Barbullushi, (2021), 'The Western Balkans as a strategic vulnerability of the EU, In Search of EU Strategic Autonomy: What Role for the Western Balkans?' (Istituto Affari Internazionali), p 13, <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/9788893682008.pdf> [last accessed 14 November 2021].

The CRM has significant potential to produce tangible results for WB citizens and businesses as well as to link the regional market with the EU Single Market. Yet this will depend both on whether regional structures such as CEFTA, RCC and WBF get the support they will need, and on whether the many existing commitments 'can progress without being obstructed'.[131]

Overall, therefore, the BP is at something of a crossroads. The dialogue it promotes is as necessary as ever, and it has pushed for tangible progress on key regional issues. Yet lack of institutional memory and fluctuations in the priorities of co-hosts can undermine its coherence. Its complementarity to formal enlargement processes needs fine-tuning without making important regional structures like RCC and RYCO – or the BP process as a whole – beholden to fluctuations in progress on accession. Likewise, in the absence of a clear governance structure, a fundamental question is how sustainable its political leadership will be. Summit declarations have often commended the vision and engagement of Germany under former Chancellor Angela Merkel.[132] For the potential of the BP to be maintained and for peacebuilding, democratisation and Euro-Atlantic integration of the WB to move ahead, a group of countries and leaders must now take on this mantle.

Recommendations to Berlin Process organisers and stakeholders

Given this state of affairs, Balkan Forum and Civil Society Platform for Democracy and Human Rights advance the following policy recommendations:

1. **Enable the BP to regain momentum by giving it a stronger backbone, setting it on firmer ground and enabling it to share, coordinate, learn and adapt:**
   - Use all available means to foster a higher level of political engagement, building on mutual trust and based on a shared responsibility to deliver on the pledges they have made following the expectations of the peoples they represent.
   - Adopt a stronger regional approach and prioritise interaction with regional structures, and avoid overly concentrating on bilateral diplomacy to individual WB6 governments.
   - Reinforce democratic and inclusive ownership of the process among WB6 states, through transparently and clearly communicating BP developments across WB6 civil societies. Help civil society in turn to consult the public and develop the

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[131] Interview with an EC official.
[132] The Chair's Conclusions of the Sofia Summit explicitly praised Germany and Angela Merkel's role in the Berlin Process saying that 'The Joint Chairmanship commends the vision of Chancellor Merkel and the German stewardship of this process'. See: Author unknown, (2020), 'Chair's Conclusions' [Sofia Summit], op cit.

demand from below that will be critical for crafting a bold policy agenda, building political will and holding governments accountable.

- Develop a well-built multi-year agenda and consolidate follow-up mechanisms to avoid host countries taking the process off track, while at the same time maintaining the benefits of flexibility.
- Develop monitoring and accountability instruments to follow up on implementation of summit pledges.
- Enhance research and learning on topics relevant to the BP so that it integrates stronger evidence, analysis and methods on core issues such as reconciliation processes, handling of former members of proscribed groups or responses to organized crime.
- Understand what is occurring within parallel process with overlapping objectives – such as under the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian macro-region (EUSAIR)[133] and the WB6-focused IPA programs and projects[134] – and coordinate carefully to ensure complementarity.

2. **Unleash the full potential of WB civil society within the BP by integrating it as an engine of ideas and accountability:**
   - WB leaders and European partners should enhance constructive dialogue and a mutually beneficial, fully inclusive relationship with civil society:
     ○ Improving communication between civil society and all levels of the process.
     ○ Ensuring earlier and longer consultation periods on key issues, plus resources for research and public consultation.
     ○ Increasing more formal integration of civil society into all BP proceedings, including higher-level meetings.[135]
     ○ Meaningfully deliberating on policy recommendations of the Civil Society, Think Tank and Youth Forums during BP proceedings.
     ○ Adding strength in depth to the BP by reinforcing CSOs' role in awareness raising, monitoring and accountability which should be both part of formal structures and independent.
     ○ Involving CSOs, and ensuring public and community based levels of dialogue, in discussing and resolving bilateral disputes.

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[133] EC, (2021), 'EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) facilitating the enlargement process of Western Balkans - Final Report', (EC), p 5, <https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/cooperate/adriat_ionian/pdf/eusair_enlarg_west_balkans.pdf>; [last accessed 8 August 2021].
[134] CBIB+ 3 Project Team, (2019), 'CBC and transnational programmes - Cross-border Institution Building' (Cross-border Institution Building), <https://cbibplus.eu/cbc-and-transnational-programmes/>; [last accessed 14 August 2021].
[135] See also Marciacq, F, (2017), 'The EU and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process: Reflecting on the EU Enlargement in Times of Uncertainty', (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Dialogue Southeast Europe).

3. **Use the BP to craft a WB region where young people have more interconnections, opportunities and voice:**
    - The BP should go further in enabling young people to engage in policy dialogue, including by facilitating exchanges with top decision-makers.
    - RYCO-style youth initiatives are an important way to connect WB young people who are often marginalised and disconnected from their peers across the region.
    - Youth organisations should be supported and encouraged to reach well beyond the easiest to access and most privileged young people, widening the circle of those engaged with peace, people-centred governance and WB-EU integration processes.
    - Encourage youth mobility within the WB6 – for example with an Erasmus programme for the WB6 – and attract more students from outside the WB to study in the region.

4. **Enhance cooperation and synergies across the WB6, and help key initiatives like the CRM and Green Agenda take flight:**
    - Build awareness and understanding between the WB public administrations on the regional background and rationale for relevant initiatives to foster a collective impact that far exceeds the sum of their individual efforts.
    - Assign stronger political backing and additional human resource capacity to accelerate implementation of the CRM initiative – including by clarifying how success could lead to EU trade incentives such as accelerated market accession.
    - Ensure investments to deliver the Green Agenda are sufficient to enable full implementation, inflation-proofed and properly performance-managed so that they incentivise leaders and administrations genuinely committed to action. As part of this, strengthen the engagement of civil society with more time for consultation and a clear role in ensuring monitoring and accountability.
    - Without duplicating existing regional cooperation mechanisms in the field of security, information sharing and judicial cooperation,[136] the BP should be more engaged on security, anti-corruption and rule of law, which are prerequisites for a healthy economy, peace and democratisation in the region.
    - Regarding digital transformation, at national level more action is needed to promote social digital inclusion, and it would be valuable to explore WB alignment with the EU in terms of safeguarding fundamental rights, civic space

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[136] On which see Leke Batalli, et al, (2019), 'Regional judicial cooperation in criminal matters: Overview of comparative practises of Western Balkan countries', (Rule of Law Programme South East Europe of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung), <https://www.kas.de/documents/280457/0/KAS+RLPSEE_CEDEM_Regional+judicial+cooperation+in+criminal+matters+in+Western+Balkan+countries+-+Publication+ENG.pdf/d67c4160-c145-59f1-8829-5eef86c2573d?t=1580719596401> [last accessed 17 November 2021].

and media freedom in the digital realm and regulating digital (civic) space according to the proposed Digital Services Act.[137]

- Continue to encourage the WB6 to implement Poznań commitments to increase the political, social and economic inclusion of the Roma community.[138]

5. **Keep reconciliation at the centre of BP efforts to build regional cooperation, and build on strong public support for this:**
   - Keep working with WB6 governments to take steps to resolve disputes and tensions; at the same time take concrete steps to make dialogue and reconciliation less vague and distant for WB people and civil society.

6. **Enhance freedom of movement and connectivity:**
   - Maintain a focus on progress toward enhanced freedom of movement and connectivity, both regionally and beyond.
   - Take concrete steps to facilitate freedom of movement and connectivity for all WB citizens traveling within the region and across the Schengen area.

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[137] EC, (2021), 'The Digital Services Act package', (EC), <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package> [last accessed 23 November].
[138] Roma Active Albania et al, (2021), 'Open Letter: Inclusion and the fight against antigypsyism in the Western Balkans and Turkey must go hand in hand', (Advancing Together), <https://advancing-together.org/open-letter-inclusion-and-the-fight-against-antigypsyism-in-the-western-balkans-and-turkey-must-go-hand-in-hand/> [last accessed 12 December 2021].

The Balkan Forum

The Balkan Forum aims to advance cross-border dialogue and create a shared regional vision and agenda for cooperative action in the Balkan region based on economic integration, prosperity, and sustainable peace.

Our work focuses on building human capital, strengthening a circular economy, and reducing unemployment and out-migration in the Balkan region.

Civil Society Platform for Democracy and Human Rights

The platform is an independently organised regional consortium of 35 civil society actors in the six countries of the Western Balkans, working across borders and sectors, in support of each other and government, to co-develop the region united by a shared desire for peace and stability. The research is one of the actions taken within the network's pledge to conduct ongoing assessments and evaluation of progress made by the Western Balkans (WB) countries towards implementing their commitments made at the summits, as part of the Berlin Process launched in 2014. It aims to map good practices, but also challenges and existing gaps, and use lessons learnt as a basis for the creation of new strategies and mechanisms, as foreseen by the Berlin Process Summit Recommendations.