



**EU AND SOUTH-EAST EUROPE 6 IN 2022:**

# **FROM ENLARGEMENT FATIGUE TO AN INVIGORATING COHESION**

**A THINK TANK AND CIVIL SOCIETY TAKE**

**POLICY BRIEF**

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**DECEMBER 2022**

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*Keywords: Corridor VIII, Regional Cooperation, Connectivity*

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*This Policy Brief was prepared in the framework of the event “Berlin Process in 2022: Key Takeaways and Next Steps” organized by the Cooperation Development Institute with the support of Hanns Seidel Stiftung.*

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## Background

During 2022 the EU Enlargement dynamics saw a gradual discourse shift from the chapter-based methodology mainly focused on Rule of Law and normative compliance, towards the importance of fulfilling geopolitical requirements. The alignment of South East Europe 6 (SEE6<sup>1</sup>) and of EU Neighboring countries with the EU foreign policy, and the reinforcement of security and resilience of partner countries took center stage as witnessed by the granting of the candidate status to Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. The official opening of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, the award of candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as the decision to apply visa-free movement for Kosovo in 2024 at the latest, were other very clear signals of the renewed geopolitical importance of the region.

During the second semester of 2022, and with the geopolitical developments of the war in Ukraine in background, European civil society actors and think tanks organized three main events with focus on the Western Balkans and the European Union.

### I. TIRANA CONNECTIVITY FORUM IN SEPTEMBER 2022 – “SECURELY CONNECTED”

Under the title “Securely Connected”, in September 2022 the Tirana Connectivity Forum focused on the role that SEE6 infrastructure and governance of local institutions have on the economic resilience and solidity of democracy in the region.

Being in the crossroads of the main European transport corridors that connect Black Sea with the Adriatic, and of energy pipelines that bring the Azeri gas to the South of Europe, SEE6 are key to the security of Southeast Europe. Consequently, the inclusion of the security requirements in the criteria used for identification and support of cross-regional transport and energy infrastructure in that historically volatile region, becomes paramount for the EU itself.

The full inclusion of the Western Balkans European Transport Corridor in the EU map of TEN-T - including the Corridor VIII segment from Durres to Skopje, as well as the Ukrainian ports of Mariupol and Odessa - in December 2022 confirms this return of geopolitics in infrastructure prioritization and development.

Moreover, in the current high-volatility context at the EU external borders, it becomes necessary for the Union to involve SEE6 in strategic areas of EU decision-making for key policies that impact the whole continent. This will secure Europe’s Southern Flank; increase the EU’s resilience; support the old continent’s growth and its green transition; secure its supply lines; as well as contribute to the convergence of SEE6 with the EU. The ongoing EU [Economic and Investment plan](#) with its financial firepower of EUR 30bn up to 2027, provides the platform for an integrated policy-making dynamics amongst Brussels and SEE6 countries at the service of growth, institutional reforms and *convergence of the region with the EU*.

But secure infrastructure requires secure institutions: institutions that are resilient and protected from incompetency, capture and corruption. To that effect, the engaged ground-breaking reforms must be continually supported, encouraged and protected in order to improve the democratic legitimacy of the SEE6 institutions in charge; the legitimacy of their

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<sup>1</sup> Since 2018 Cooperation and Development Institute utilizes the term South East Europe 6 – SEE6 instead of Western Balkans 6

deliverables and very importantly: the legitimacy of their internal processes and good governance mechanisms.

TCF22 concluded that SEE6 specialized CSO and think tanks have the expertise, experience, and the specific knowledge of local conditions to efficiently engage in a systemic way and contribute to policy-making and in the whole infrastructure project cycle. To that end, the European Union and SEE6 institutions must create the space and support this engagement. EU Economic and Investment Plan and the EU Green Agenda, by their financial engagement and tangible impact on the daily life of WB6 citizens, are among the most relevant initiatives needing citizen engagement and a structured contribution of CSOs.

## **II. PRAGUE OCTOBER 2022: “EU ENLARGEMENT THINK-TANK FORUM: RETHINKING ENLARGEMENT IN TIMES OF GEOPOLITICAL EARTHQUAKES”**

The goal of Prague EU Enlargement Think Tank forum (October 2022) was to produce concrete recommendations on how to enhance the EU enlargement policy. The main message coming out of the Forum was to signal to the governments that the involvement of think tanks in questions about the future of the SEE6 and Eastern Europe is not only desirable but necessary for the success of the accession process and the democratization of society. Climate change and energy security brought into the debates the resilience factor as a defining variable of the solidity of institutions and of infrastructure.

The workings of the Forum shed light on the challenges that Enlargement dynamics is facing in a time of high geopolitical tensions; the necessity for the EU to review and adapt itself so as to get ready for the unique context with regard to the next wave of Enlargement; and on innovative scenarios and modalities that Enlargement should consider - such as the Staged Accession or SEE6 joining the Single Market, etc. - to adapt to 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges.

To deal with the low-visibility impact of EU support; of the missing intermediary stage of Enlargement (as versus “in” or “out”); or with the limitations resulting from the top-down approach of Enlargement, etc, the notion of “*Convergence of SEE6 with EU*” was brought in as complementary to the Enlargement. The debate on the inclusion of Convergence (with its multilayered, multi-actor and development-oriented approach) into the overall Enlargement dynamics (defined by its intragovernmental, belonging to EU foreign policy domain and normative focus) must be further developed and detailed. In this context, the Berlin Process 2.0 with focus on infrastructure and regional cooperation, as well as the newly proposed European Political Community offer useful, feasible and realistic ways of moving forward.

One of particularities of the Prague Think Tank Forum was the high attention and engagement of Czech presidency officials in the think tank presentations and resulting debates. This involvement - both official and off-the-record - led to conclusions that directly nourished the initial goal of the Prague 2022 forum, i.e: promote the involvement of think tanks in the decision-making dynamics in the SEE6 and Eastern Europe as desirable and necessary for the success of the accession process and of the democratization of society.

From that specific angle, the main takeaways of Prague Forum can be listed below:

- EU and SEE6 institutions must create the space and support the engagement of SEE6 think tanks in the policy-making cycle. Economic and Investment Plan and EU Green Agenda are among the most relevant initiatives needing SEE6 citizen engagement and support, as well as a structured professional contribution from local think tanks;

- Building up on the Czech Presidency experience, it is advisable that the Member State in charge of the EU Presidency organizes a regular semestrial meeting with SEE6 Think Tanks on issues touching upon EU policies and SEE6 society, democratic resilience, citizen engagement, and Cohesion of SEE6 with EU (and Enlargement) in general;
- there is need to increase and reinforce the role of Think Tanks in reinforcing EU messages and fight fake news all over the continent;
- in selected areas, the country in charge of the EU Presidency can envisage consulting SEE6 think tanks on selected issues, before General Affairs Council meetings, as deemed relevant;
- to increase transparency and accountability, and while exercising its Observer status at Western Balkans Investment Framework, EU Parliament should consult with specialised Think Tanks and CSOs on EU-financed infrastructure investments in SEE6;
- while the newcomers – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia - need a long-term strategy in view of accession to the EU, the WB6 requires immediate, tailored and increased support towards reinforced convergence with the EU.

### III. BERLIN NOVEMBER 2022: CIVIL SOCIETY AND THINK TANK FORUM OF THE WESTERN BALKANS SUMMIT

In early November, the Western Balkans Summit (WBS) - also accompanied by a Civil Society and Think Tank Forum (CS&TTF) – concluded with the signature of three agreements, pertaining to the Common Regional Market (CRM). The novelty of the 2022 WBS vintage was the engagement of CSO and think Tanks with policy-makers: once during the Ministers of Foreign Affairs meeting and the second time during the meeting of the heads of State and Governments. This close contact was continued with an intensive follow-up dynamics that brought together the Civil Society & Think Tanks moderators with policy-makers for a more in-depth exploration of common interest issues as resulting from the CSF forum.

Organized in thematic groups (around the Green Agenda, Information Disorder, EU Integration an Infrastructure Investments), the policy recommendations stemming from CSO and TTF underline the need to keep SEE6 governments accountable for the implementation of their engagements, and engage CSO into full policy-making cycle (not only in consultation) and mechanisms. Civil society as a shaper of public policies and not only a watchdog, has resonated strongly in TCF22 and in Prague TTF. As such Think Tanks and CSOs can and should participate in the implementation of EIP, CRM and Green Agenda.

Some of the recommendations brought to the Berlin MFA meeting are:

- Berlin Process is the *convergence engine* of SEE6 with EU, based on the EUR 30bn financial power of EIP; on the harmonization of rules and standards with EU through CRM; and with the support to growth, societal values and transforming power of the Green Agenda drive;
- EU and SEE6 institutions must create the space and also support the engagement of specialized Think Tanks (TT) and CSO in policy-making and full project cycle. TT and CSO engagement are key to keeping institutions accountable. Only transparent,

accountable and well governed institutions can be secure, reliable and efficient partners of the EU;

- The input from specialised CSO and Think Tanks is a valuable tool for EU and International Finance Institutions engaged in infrastructure support in the Western Balkans, especially in the phases of infrastructure project identification and prioritization. Without going into the very technical details of those projects (being it in transport, energy, digital, etc) CSO and Think Tanks should be consulted on what kind of infrastructure the region and/or a selected country need, what are the budgetary constraints and which project is a priority for the citizen (as vs. a preference of the elites). To ensure full compliance of those projects with EU values, specialised CSO and Think Tanks should become an integral part of their integrity compliance monitoring mechanisms.

In conclusion, the Berlin Process provided a very strong injection of political will through the German engagement as translated by the work of the Special Envoy and the visible political support it received from the Chancellery. The signature of three CRM Agreements marked the end of the EU constructive ambiguity approach in bilateral relations, while Regional Cooperation Council engagement provided the much-needed continuity between two WBS summits. For the next steps, *Berlin Process must steer SEE6 towards cohesion & convergence with the EU*. To that reason it should mobilize a better and bigger use and amount of the EU Budget well beyond the IPA; and bring the focus on the good governance of SEE6 institutions at every level.

#### IV. NEXT STEPS: FOCUS ON IMPLEMENTATION

The 2022 achievements in SEE6 regional cooperation and in the Connectivity Agenda were achieved because of persistence, groundwork and a renewed and clear political will from major players with skin in the game. Another factor was the conscious bypassing of bilateral issues so as to focus on what can be achieved in an inclusive format of six.

From an NGO point of view the main takeaways from 2022 include the need to hold SEE6 institutions accountable on their engagements; to involve specialized CSO and Think Tanks in policy-making; to follow up, focus on & engage in the implementation of signed agreements, and to connect CSO with steering mechanisms and political processes of Enlargement.

2023 will be a very intensive one with CSO and Think Tank regional fora starting from March with Budapest Forum, and then continuing with Belgrade Security Conference, Tirana Western Balkans Summit, TCF2023, and many others. Beyond their own field of expertise, *a common thread uniting all those events will be the focus on the implementation of what was decided upon, agreed and signed in 2022*.

Already SOGDE and ASPEN have been implementing a pioneering follow-up strategy on the recommendations of the Berlin WBS CSO Forum. CDI and its regional partners have started the monitoring of CRM agreements achieved in Berlin, all by pushing for the Cohesion concept to have more visibility and contribution in the accession dynamics. At the same time, a core group of SEE6 Think Tanks have started to monitor the implementation of EIP Flagship projects all over the region and identification of entry points for CSO and Think Tanks to get engaged into the identification and monitoring of implementation of flagship projects.

All this raises the need for the appropriate mechanisms for SEE6 society to not only monitor but also engage with the implementation phase in policy-making as well as in infrastructure project cycle. This also means shifting from the government-centered and controlled EU support towards an innovative cooperation of the EU with a much larger and representative base of actors where local Think Tanks, CSO and small businesses are the key.

All those developments bring the interest of the SEE6 territory and of its citizen at the heart of the EU efforts. And this is why the bottom-up Cohesion rationale (based on territory, development and citizen) must be significantly reinforced to complement the top-down Enlargement dynamics (that focuses on the political, institutions and normative context). In this approach, partnership with specialized regional actors such as RCC, Transport Permanent Secretariat and others will be of utmost importance.

Only through the above we can *move away from Enlargement fatigue and introduce an invigorating cohesion dynamics.*

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*Tirana, December 2022*





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