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THE BERLIN PROCESS 2014 – 2024:

RATIONALE, GOVERNANCE,  
OUTCOMES AND NEXT STEPS

## The Berlin Process 2014 – 2024: Rationale, Governance, Outcomes and next steps

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## THE BERLIN PROCESS 2014 – 2024: RATIONALE, GOVERNANCE, OUTCOMES AND NEXT STEPS

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## PART I. BERLIN PROCESS 2014 – 2024

### Introducing the questions

Ten years after its launch has the Berlin Process (BP) fulfilled its goals? Is its continuation warranted?

To offer a thorough response, various inquiries must be addressed. First, why the Berlin Process was established? What were its initial objectives? Did it evolve, and how? What has been its impact? If it should it continue, in which form?

Below, we will endeavour to provide insights for each of these queries.

### The “why”

It is often overlooked today that in 2014, there was widespread discontent in South East Europe 6 (SEE6) when the President of the EU Commission J. C. Juncker announced that there would be no enlargement until 2025. To reaffirm EU’s commitment to Enlargement in Western Balkans, Chancellor Merkel convened in Berlin a meeting of the highest representatives of SEE6. Supporting Enlargement was the goal of the Berlin Process in 2014, and it has remained unchanged since.

Its initial aim was further developed in the Western Balkans Vienna Summit in 2015, where BP partners subscribed to: i) foster connectivity between the EU and SEE6, as well as within SEE6, and; ii) promote regional cooperation and resolve bilateral disputes. These two main objectives remain today at the heart of Berlin Process.

### The “what”

In its early days, the interest and enthusiasm that Berlin Process sparked in the region was tempered when it became clear that no additional funds from EU budget or from EU Member States were allocated to supplement the already existing EU IPA budget line or bilateral cooperation funds.

Moreover the BP became visible only once a year – during the annual Leaders’ Summit. This high political level meeting remained for some years the sole new institutional emanation of BP initiative. In between those yearly events no supporting structure, neither specific legislative power was foreseen to equip BP. Consequently the Berlin Process was characterised by three “no”: no new budget; no new structures; no new legislation.

As a result, while BP offers vision and political support to regional cooperation and to connectivity in Western Balkans, the resulting policy-making and project implementation are carried out by other institutions, whether national, regional or EU-based. Those institutions operate under their own rules and are supported by their respective budgets.

Until 2022, the annual Leaders’ Summit along with the associated Civil Society Summit, Youth Forum and Business Forums, were the proper and visible “face” of the Berlin Process. It is only after the appointment of a German Special Representative for the Western Balkans (GSR) that the Berlin Process got “a phone number” that was functional during the whole year.

To establish a common framework describing the Berlin Process and its contribution to Enlargement, we have categorized it in four governance layers: politics, policy-making, programs, and projects.

1. With **Politics** we understand the process of decision making that shapes the political agenda and drives policy-making;
2. **Policy-making** guides the design and implementation of different programs and projects, as well as match them with needed resources. The outcome of policy-making is the formulation of policies, defined as guidelines or principles that inform and guide decision-making and action;
3. **Programs** are collections of related projects and activities aimed at achieving broader policy goals;
4. **Projects** are individual temporary endeavours undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result. Projects have well-defined objectives, scopes, timelines, and budgets.

Politics and Policy-Making are continuous and iterative processes influenced by various stakeholders and contextual factors.

Programs and Projects help governments (or international institutions) to attain their policy objectives. It is through projects that policy-making becomes visible and its outcomes, tangible. They have finite durations and are subject to project management principles and methodologies.

Berlin Process Leaders' Summit does not have the programme or the project "vehicles" to translate its political decisions or policy drive into action. Notwithstanding, Berlin Process provides high level political support, broad outreach, and high visibility to regional cooperation initiatives and respective policies, and to EU connectivity projects in the region. To this day it remains a main Enlargement catalyser in SEE6.

The Berlin process lacks monitoring and correcting mechanisms that apply during the implementation of agreements reached in its yearly Leaders' Summits. For regional agreements it is the regional cooperation structures that provide technical support to their preparation, and inform Leaders' Summit and GSR about their progress. To the best of our knowledge, there is no existing BP mechanism that provides the same function for CA / EIP / Growth plan infrastructure projects developed under the Berlin Process' hat.

To fill this gap, Civil Society Organisations (CSO) in the region have taken the initiative to produce shadow monitoring reports on both CA and EIP projects, and recently on CRM Mobility Agreements CRM MA). The sole publicly available tool for monitoring of ratification and of implementation steps of 4 CRM MA is designed and implemented by a CSO<sup>1</sup>.

## The "how"

With no institutions, budget or legislative power, the Berlin Process succeeded in positioning both Regional Cooperation and the Connectivity Agenda (latter transformed into the Economic and Investment plan, and now complemented by the Growth Plan) at the forefront of the Enlargement dynamics in Western Balkans. How did it do it<sup>2</sup>?

Berlin Process "borrows" its budget, institutions and legislative power from a range of institutions, where the main ones are outlined below:

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<sup>1</sup> Currently supported by Federal Foreign Office, CDI has been closely monitoring and promoting the engagement of SEE6 civil society in the Common Regional Market

<sup>2</sup> It can be argued that the sole regional institution specific to the Berlin Process is RYCO

### *Budget sources*

- from SEE6 national budgets: i) approximately two-thirds of Berlin Process connectivity infrastructure project costs are covered through loans supported by SEE6 sovereign guarantees; and, ii) relies on SEE6 national budgets to cover nearly 100% of the costs induced by regional cooperation;
- from Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) allocations: i) IPA grants cover up to 50% for certain EIP infrastructure projects; and, ii) up to 100% of the technical assistance cost for regional cooperation measures and selected actions;
- from EU Member States bilateral cooperation: a significant fraction of grant allocations from Member States allocated to SEE6 under bilateral cooperation schemes, support the: i) infrastructure projects; ii) the adoption of the “acquis”; or, iii) the capacity building in sectors that are within the scope of the Berlin Process;
- from International Financial Institutions (IFI): IFI provide loans for infrastructure projects and for sector developments that fall within the scope of Berlin Process.

### *Institutional resources*

- SEE6 national institutions: i) prepare, ratify and implement regional cooperation agreements; and, ii) identify, prepare, implement and operate infrastructure connectivity projects;
- regional cooperation structures (such as RCC, CEFTA, Transport Permanent Secretariat or Energy Community) are active in policy-making and handle the technical preparatory work, implementation, monitoring and reporting for regional cooperation agreements;
- EU-level structures like WBIF support connectivity projects from inception to completion; etc.

### *Legislative agency is drawn;*

- from the EU acquis: i) in connectivity, through the integration of connectivity projects in TEN-T and TEN-E; and, ii) in regional cooperation through the harmonisation process which involves the adoption of the Single Market acquis in relevant areas;
- from regional cooperation agreements such as the 4 CRM Mobility Agreements and other similar agreements;
- from national legislation in matters related to policy-making, norms and standards;
- from IFI with regard to norms and standards applied to infrastructure project governance.

Not having any budget, structure or legislative power, BP lacks its own *implementation agency*. To see through its political engagement into tangible outcomes on the ground, BP depends on: i) SEE6 governments political will and on the capacity of national institutions; ii) on EU support for policy guidance; and on, iii) the financial carrot of IPA, of IFI and of bilateral EU Member State – SEE6 government allocations.

Most importantly, in its catalysing function Berlin Process brings forth clear political support to sustain and speed up the EU Enlargement in Western Balkans. It fulfils the role of a pre-accession structural instrument which complements IPA by providing the political will and geopolitical rationale required for policies, measures and projects needed in the Western Balkans accession specifics.

## The "who"

The Berlin Process has provided a privileged platform for EU Member States with significant historical and economic ties to the region, to further their engagement and adapt their support to SEE66 accession needs. This *"coalition of the willing"* has been supported since the beginning by the IFIs. Later on the EU also joined in, as evidenced from the increasing presence of highest representatives from the EU Commission and EU Council in Leaders' Summits.

The willing Member States brought in the *political will* required to drive forward political decisions such as the signature in six of 4 CRM mobility agreements. The EU Commission provides the normative framework – i.e. the *acquis* – along with the respective financial support for both policy-making (such as in the case of Single Market that provides the rails where CRM progresses), and for CA/EIP/Growth Plan projects (selected, financed and monitored by WBIF). IFI make sure that infrastructure project dossiers are mature, respect best standards of project governance and are met with the appropriate financial support.

SEE6 institutions have been amongst the most pro-active BP actors. Initially visible in the "family photos" after each summit, SEE6 representatives have embraced the ownership of regional cooperation, the benefits of CRM, or the synergies created through collaboration in cross-border infrastructure projects. Locally-driven initiatives such as Open Balkans initiative, the inclusion of the western leg of Corridor VIII in the Trans-European Transport Network TEN-T Core Network, or the renewed focus on the importance of Convergence principle, illustrate the ever-growing role of WB6 institutional actors in the framework of the Berlin Process.

The regional cooperation structures provide the daily platform where the political will and EU *acquis* are transformed in sector policies to be implemented throughout the region. However, the absence of implementation mechanisms in the form of programs and / or projects, leaves the BP implementation step without adequate support. Neither the Leaders' Summit nor the GSR possesses the necessary tools to hold national or regional structures in charge, accountable. In the event of non-follow-up, their only recourse is to raise the contentious issues in the subsequent Leaders' Meeting or in bilateral meetings.

CSO and businesses have gradually moved up into the hierarchy of Berlin Process actors. But while WB6 Chamber Investment Forum has been receiving regular visibility, capacity building and financial support by EU Commission and MS to participate in policy-making (i.e. preparation of CRM action plans), and in Connectivity Agenda (position as observer in WBIF Board), CSOs still remain outside the Berlin Process "ring of power". Even if encouraged by MS through their invitation to Leaders' Meetings; by EU MS *ad-hoc* financial support to different CSOs engaged in Berlin Process; or by MS (as well as by privately-owned) financial support of the yearly CSF Summit, no official space has been created to allow for CSO systemic engagement in regional policy-making and/or in infrastructure project cycle management (PCM) until now<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed overview of CSO engagement in EIP Flagship projects see: "[Institutional actors, Mechanism and Engagement of CSO in the Economic and Investment Plan](#)", CDI 2023

## Intermediary Results

At this point it appears that the main contribution and added value of Berlin Process resides at the political layer. Since 2022 the appointment of a GSR has revitalised BP policy-making dynamics as shown by the signature (and ratification) of four CRM mobility agreements. For the future it remains to be seen if BP will also be equipped with monitoring, implementation or enforcement agency, and if yes, to what extent and in what form.

Presented below is an indicative compilation (though not exhaustive) of outcomes and outputs resulting from a decade of Berlin Process. Prior to delving into these details, it is essential to keep in mind the "*three no's*" feature of this initiative.

### *Outcomes: more legitimacy and inclusiveness*

- promoted the *de-facto* association of SEE6 leaders in EU decisions impacting SEE6, through Leaders' Summit;
- brought in the regional cooperation dimension into Enlargement (EU accession negotiations are bilateral while BP is of regional nature);
- laid out the political ground for the launching of the Connectivity Agenda (in 2015 in Vienna); of Green Agenda (in Poznan in 2018); and of Common Regional Market (in Sofia in 2020);
- initiated the involvement of SEE6 countries' Legislative branch in regional cooperation and in the oversight of EIP Flagship projects;
- officialised SEE6 business involvement in CRM, and of their participation in EIP;
- acknowledged formally the Berlin Process yearly CSO Summit as a key feature of Enlargement legitimacy.

### *Outputs: tangible support to Accession process*

- Establishment and operationalizing of Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO);
- Establishment and running of WB6 Chamber Investment Forum;
- Promotion of Western Balkans TEN-T Corridor into EU Core TEN-T network adopted by EU in December 2022
- Signature, ratification and implementation of four CRM MA.

As expected from a process that lack implementation structures, during its first ten years Berlin Process main breakthrough lies at political level. Supported by a clear political drive, the inclusivity principle (such as involvement of SEE6 businesses and of CSO, or signature of regional cooperation agreements in six); the increased local ownership in regional cooperation and connectivity projects; the clear commitment and ownership from engaged EU Member States; the growing relevance of place-based knowledge and of stakeholder involvement; the inclusion of geo-political criteria in identification and support of infrastructure projects; and the increased focus on tangible results, characterise the achievements of BP.

At the same time they provide valuable benchmarks for the way ahead.



## Today

Today, the recently announced Growth Plan brings the regional cooperation and EU connectivity agenda / EIP into the convergence perspective. GP robust conditionality outlined in the pre-conditions, general conditions and payment conditions, puts the EU Commission and the IFI at the forefront of both regional cooperation and of infrastructure project development.

In this new Enlargement dynamic, is the Berlin Process format still useful? Is there still a need for EU-MS-SEE6 coordination and agreement at highest political level to drive forward regional cooperation and region's convergence with EU? Can the Berlin Process continue to deliver without a programme and / or project component? How can it support Growth Plan reforms and projects, and / or enhance its three-layered conditionality?

After 10 years, the Green Agenda, the Convergence with the EU, and the strengthening of the Social component have gradually become part of BP list of objectives. What these developments have in common are the: i) need for explicit political and financial support from EU and MS; the, ii) EU's responsibility to coordinate and include Western Balkans countries in its EU sector policy-making; iii) the unwavering commitment of SEE6 political and economic elites; and most importantly, the iv) absolute need for SEE6 public support.

As a pre-accession structural instrument, Berlin Process provides the political rationale and back up required to keep SEE6 regional cooperation in track; brings region's infrastructure into alignment with EU *acquis* (it being transport, energy, digital or Green); and maintains the accession focus on Convergence. It is also uniquely placed to contribute to Enlargement visibility and outreach in the region.

## Tomorrow

Berlin Process was launched to support the accession of WB6 to EU. Since 2014, it has hammered in the message of an unequivocal EU commitment to full membership of SEE6 countries, and endeavoured to reassure and support their quicker EU accession pace. It proved essential in engaging with the region when Enlargement was dormant. It corralled the political will of Balkan politicians towards inclusivity. The lessons learned from EU Connectivity Agenda are now being used to shape the geopolitical and good governance aspects of the EU Global Gateway.

In 2024 the list of challenges faced by Enlargement has sensibly grown. The region's EU accession pace and Enlargement dynamics now are directly affected by the geopolitical tensions arising from the war in Ukraine; by the persisting bilateral disputes in the region; by diverging trend between SEE6 and EU economies; by SEE6 political landscape polarisation; by the necessity for EU to reform before the next Enlargement wave; by increasing competition from third-party actors; by a sensible rise in extremes in EU MS directly affecting relations with Western Balkans; by slow growth rates; etc.

In this geopolitical context is Berlin Process still relevant? The answer hinges on a comprehensive understanding of the interests of both EU and Western Balkans stakeholders, viewed through the lens of values, security, resilience and fierce competition.

## Certitudes and challenges

The Berlin process has significantly contributed to the progress of SEE6 accession to the EU by supporting region's connectivity and advancement towards EU single market. Through its focus on development, it has evidenced the absolute need for convergence. BP achievements in connectivity contribute to the security and resilience of Europe.

Deconstructing BP in governance layers has provided us with the opportunity to identify and understand its actors, mechanisms and procedures. The main challenge appears to lie in the absence of Berlin Process “vehicles” through which its political will can be translated into action.

Another challenge involves internal coordination, monitoring and accountability features of the process. While the appointment of GSR has radically improved BP continuity & coordination during the year, his working relations with “implementing actors” rely on their good will. BP lacks established monitoring and accountability mechanisms. While such mechanisms can be borrowed from other structures (regional cooperation institutions / EU / WBIF / etc), there is still a need for their coordination and alignment with the BP rationale.

The third challenge emphasizes the importance of learning from the Berlin Process and promoting its innovative features. Being in the intersection between EU Enlargement policy, EU Cohesion policy and EU Foreign Policy, the Berlin Process offers invaluable insights into how EU should address the challenges matrix of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Next steps

Before making the first step, we should take a moment and imagine how regional cooperation in Western Balkans or the Connectivity Agenda would have progressed without the Berlin Process. How the involvement of EU Member States, of EU, of IFI, of regional cooperation structures, of SEE6 businesses or of SEE6 civil society would have evolved; or how the Accession would have been impacted (if at all).

For the way forward, we would suggest to start with initiating a discussion on the governance of Berlin Process. This conversation should encompass the necessity to: i) continuously support the Leaders’ Summit, especially when organised outside an EU Member State; ii) present a comprehensive overview of CRM achievements, of Connectivity Agenda, of the Economic and Investment Plan, and of the upcoming Growth Plan; iii) identify, consolidate and reinforce the distinctive added value elements of the Berlin Process to regional cooperation, to region’s ownership, to critical infrastructure initiatives and to a speedier convergence of the region with EU. Most importantly, the tangible contribution of Berlin Process in adopting the EU *acquis* for measures that fall within its scope of action must be the unifying feature of this debate.

An innovative approach would be to add “appreciative inquiry<sup>4</sup>” to the problem-solving approach, when designing next interventions of Berlin Process. This would mean identifying, explaining and promoting BP best cases and / or lessons learned across all its governance layers:

- *in politics* layer, by drawing lessons learnt from Open Balkans initiative and its increased local ownership features; from increased inclusivity as referred to four CRM MA signature in six or involvement of CSO and businesses, etc;
- *in policy-making* layer, by intensifying the support and extending the scope of adoption of EU *acquis* in BP areas. In addition of normative framework, the *acquis* should be redefined as the adoption before accession of EU policies and good governance rules. In practical terms it will mean valorising the inclusion of SEE6 in TEN-T corridors; evidencing the advantages resulting from the implementation of four CRM MA, and the access to EU Single Market; immediate SEE6 access to EU Cohesion policies Toolbox, etc;

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of application of “appreciative inquiry” in SEE6, see: “[Securing the Resilience of Justice Sector Reform in Albania](#)”, S. Blockmans, A. Hackaj, CDI Publications March 2021

- *in programs layer*: by underlining the commitment of EU and of engaged MS to SEE6 green transition, and by increasing their support; by quantifying benefits for local economies resulting from SEPA, etc;
- *in projects layer*: by singling out the contribution that EIP flagship projects offer to the development of the region, and to its communities; by promoting “Berlin Process Projects” – initiatives that add the political criteria to the project financial efficiency criteria. Impact on bilateral disputes, on local development, on mitigating migration and brain drain, or on promotion of critical connectivity infrastructure should be taken into account when identifying, assessing, preparing, financing, implementing and operation EU-funded projects.

## PART II. TCF23 MAIN TAKE AWAYS ...

Under the theme “Reloading Enlargement”, the Tirana Connectivity Forum 2023 (TCF2023) held from 18-19 September in Tirana brought together policy makers from the EU and WB region, leading think tanks and specialized CSO, regional cooperation organizations, IFI representatives and civil servants in charge of Economic and Investment Plan and of the implementation of different international agreements. The discussions were held under the Chatham House rule.

The goal of TCF2023 was to shape the ongoing European debate about a development-based accession to EU that increases the resilience of South East Europe 6 (SEE6) reform achievements; and, aims at reducing the convergence gap with EU neighbouring countries.

### **In the current geopolitical context, the Enlargement project needs reframing, resourcing and reloading**

This strategy is geared towards fostering European development in the Western Balkans and expanding the European Union's impact on the citizens of the WB6 region.

The event started by emphasizing the Berlin Process role as a catalyst for Enlargement. The new German government made Western Balkans a main strategic priority, where Energy, Green Agenda and progress in Common Regional Market are its main pillars. This strategy aims at building Europe in the Western Balkans and increasing EU actions outreach to WB6 citizen.

### **...on Common Regional Market and the Mobility Agreements**

In the first TCF23 roundtable on “*Common Regional Market: from Technical Preparation to Implementation*” the primary focus was on the ratification process of the three Mobility Agreements within the Common Regional Market (CRM).

The Common Regional Market is vital to unlock the economic potential of the region and make the Western Balkans a more attractive place for European investors. The four CRM Mobility Agreements are a stepping-stone towards this direction. They will give a real boost to the regional economic integration by creating a positive chain reaction which will bring closer the Western Balkans to the Single Market, and increase region appeal to European investors.

CSO representatives shared the monitoring results of CRM Mobility Agreements, aiming to illustrate the challenges encountered and derive valuable lessons from the ratification process. Subsequently, attention shifted to the implementation phase of these agreements and to the technical preparation of other regional agreements in the pipeline. Representatives from regional cooperation institutions reported the progress reached in establishing Commissions/Joint working groups responsible for the implementation of Mobility Agreements, as well as on the advancements in the ratification process in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Montenegro.

While awaiting for the ratification of CEFTA agreements, there are possibilities to deepen the technical cooperation about the rules of origin; to advance on the Protocol of Trade facilitation in Goods and Services; on the recognition of Authorised Operators and on the

establishment of Green Lanes between WB6 countries and EU Member States. Meanwhile harmonizing the legislation of each WB6 country with the respective EU *acquis* directly contributes to the success of the CRM. Additionally, emphasizing outreach, communication, and preparation of local administrations and businesses on CRM emerged as a primary objective in this endeavour.

The importance of political will and of targeted communication on the benefits of CRM was underlined as key factor for a successful CRM implementation. This endeavour should also include Member States and EU institutions overseeing the Single Market. Harmonizing the legislation of each WB6 country with the respective EU *acquis* directly contributes to the success of the CRM. Additionally, emphasizing outreach, communication, and preparation of local administrations and businesses on CRM emerged as a primary objective in this endeavor.

A main takeaway from this roundtable, was the necessity to strengthen cooperation between SEE6 CSOs and regional organizations to enhance outreach and communication components. The debates further brought in the repercussions of the war in Ukraine, and the role of the WB6 parliaments in the oversight of CRM implementation.

Currently, the Commission is engaged in a comprehensive reflection on ways to bring the Western Balkans closer to the Single Market even before full membership. The renewed collaboration and the anticipated successful signing of Association Agreements in 2023 with all Western Balkan countries for their participation in the Single Market program contribute to the overarching goal of integrating the Western Balkans into the EU Single Market by aligning them with the same business dynamics established for Member States.

In this new framework of cooperation, the support provided by the EU Commission to SEE6 institutions can manifest in several forms:

- Conducting legislative checks on draft laws to ensure accurate transposition of the *Acquis*.
- Facilitating the participation of countries in expert groups, enabling the exchange of best practices with Member States.
- Involvement in technical subcommittees related to areas under DG GROW's purview, such as Free Movement of Goods, Services, Public Procurement, Industrial Property Rights, and Enterprise Industrial Policy.

The alignment with the *Acquis* emerges as a crucial driver of regional cooperation and CRM implementation.

#### *Panelists:*

- Jorida Shytaj, Senior Political Advisor, Regional Cooperation Council
- Emina Muminovic, Project Coordinator, Centre for Contemporary Politics, Serbia
- Adis Muhovic, Executive Director, Centre for Policy and Governance, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Danijela Gacevic, Acting Director, Central European Free Trade Agreement
- Francesca Porcelli, International Value Chains Unit, DG GROW (online)

#### *Discussants:*

- Zoran Nechev, Senior Researcher at Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis Skopje;
- Arjana Dyrmishi, CEFTA Contact Point, Director of the Directorate of Trade Policies, Ministry of Finance and Economy, Albania;

- Ferenc Nemeth, Program Manager and Research fellow at Hungarian Institute of International Affairs;
- Ermelinda Durmishi, Director of the Directorate of Higher Education Policies and Scientific Research, Ministry of Education and Sports, Albania;
- Dafina Peci, Executive Director at National Youth Congress of Albania.

## ...on Enlargement Scenarios

During the roundtable discussion on “*Enlargement Scenarios*” the debates revolved around specific enlargement scenarios presented by European think tanks. The new geopolitical momentum in favour of Enlargement necessitates collaborative efforts from both the EU and WB6. This requires an active involvement from the region in developing new concepts and strategies. In this context, various proposals were put forward, including early access to the EU Single Market, a staged approach to accession; increased funding for the region, and the establishment of a fixed EU accession date. These proposals aim to keep the enlargement process on course and address the socio-economic and geopolitical challenges faced by both the EU and the region.

The primary rationale behind these proposals is to enhance the preparedness of EU and WB6 policymakers for future challenges and extend the benefits of Enlargement to the region even before full EU membership. While the announcement of the new Growth Plan demonstrates the EU's commitment to the region, the specific details related to finance and governance still require further development.

The dominance of a market-based Enlargement approach needs to be carefully balanced with the local development component and region's need for convergence with the EU. It is here that the Cohesion approach becomes relevant. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that over the past 30 years, the convergence between the SEE6 countries and the EU has not been in the focus, while economic governance in SEE6 is still in need of thorough improvement. Additionally, the local economic and social consequences of SEE6's access to the EU Single Market have not been adequately evaluated. More data is essential to understand the direction, size, and cost of internal reforms needed for both the EU and SEE6.

Various scenarios have been presented, including granting candidate countries access to all four freedoms in the EU market, staged accession, the Czech six-point proposal, reducing the convergence gap, and frontloading cohesion into the enlargement process. These scenarios underline the geopolitical necessity of bringing the SEE6 countries closer to the EU through more profound political, sectoral, and institutional cooperation. Initiatives such as the establishment of the College of Europe Campus in Tirana is an illustration of concrete action taken by the EU.

In a context where the Western Balkans (WB6) are not fully prepared for full membership and Member States (MS) are unwilling to accept new members, the new accession scenarios proposed by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) aim to maximize the region's benefits before full membership and provide viable enlargement scenarios. More structural resources, rather than being tied to individual projects, need to be allocated to SEE6 countries. While negotiations for the new Multiannual Financial Framework may seem distant, discussions on including EU candidates and applicants for candidacy in EU Cohesion policies to counterbalance the opening of their markets should commence in 2024. The European Commission should conduct a comprehensive analysis of the costs and impacts related to the access of SEE6 countries to the EU Single Market to lay the groundwork for such discussions.

A key recommendation emerging from panel discussions highlights the importance of collaboration between CSOs and think tanks to consolidate and harmonize these proposals into a well-structured civil society message. The European Commission stands to benefit from consolidating the existing BP CSO and Think Tank forum and expanding its scope to cover enlargement. This Civil Society Forum could serve as a platform for knowledge-

sharing, establishing networks, and supporting a common vision for Europe's future. It could be modeled after the already existing Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum.

*Panellists:*

- Adnan Cerimagic, Senior Analyst, European Stability Initiative, Berlin
- Strahinja Subotic, Programme Manager, European Policy Centre, Serbia
- Matteo Bonomi, Senior Fellow, EU politics and institutions, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome
- Stefan Ristovski, Researcher, European Policy Institute, Skopje

*Discussants:*

- Steven Blockmans, Director of Research, CEPS (online);
- Andi Dobrushki, Executive Director of Open Society Foundation for Western Balkans;
- Jana Juzova, Senior Research Fellow, EUROPEUM Institute, Prague – Brussels;
- Klaus Fiesinger, Regional Director for South East Europe, Hanns Seidel Stiftung;
- Milan Nic, Senior research fellow at the Center for Order and Governance in Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia, DGAP (online);
- Gjergji Vurmo, Programme Director and Senior Researcher at Institute for Democracy & Mediation (IDM).



## ...on CSO Engagement in the Implementation of the EU Economic and Investment Plan

During the third roundtable discussion centred on “*CSO Engagement in the Implementation of the EU Economic and Investment Plan (EIP)*” in the region, underscoring the added value of involving CSOs at all stages of infrastructure project cycle management.

The war in Ukraine has reshaped connectivity. Additionally, the concepts of friend shoring and near shoring have highlighted Balkans peninsula significance in the supply chains of the European continent. In this context, the Economic and Investment Plan and its flagship connectivity projects gain particular importance in the evolving geopolitical landscape.

With regard to connectivity SEE6 adopt the EU *acquis* in transport sector, by upgrading, greening and increasing the length of its railways, of its maritime and the river ports, upgrade the border crossing points and, in general. Local industrial capacity needs to be planned in a harmonised way so as to get the best from the synergy between production centers and transport & energy networks.

The very important role of IFI in developing and selecting infrastructure projects was underlined during the 3<sup>rd</sup> roundtable. WB6 civil servants raised the question of why project eligibility criteria should be decided by IFI when at least 85% of the project financing relies on national loans. However, the panellists mentioned that the choice of Flagships has been done in cooperation with SEE6 governments and the project prioritisation is done through NSPP. In that context CSO contribution is welcome to make its contribution.

But notwithstanding various statements on the need to incorporate civil society into EIP-related consultative processes, the current situation on the ground is far from satisfactory. There is a pressing need for the institutionalisation of CSO engagement in EIP project cycle management (PCM). CSO involvement is necessary to reinforce project legitimacy, increase transparency and accountability, and contribute to the impact and visibility on the ground.

Institutions and structures in charge per PCM phase	Identification	Project assessment / appraisal / screening	Planning and design	Procuring / Tendering	Contract implementation and execution	Evaluation and audit
Ministries of Line (central government)	X	X	X	X	X	0
Local Government Units	0		0		0	
NIPAC/NIC/Strategic Planning Committee	0	0	X			0
EU Delegation in Tirana		X				
EC/DG NEAR (WBIF SECRETARIAT)		0	0	0		X
Partner Financial Organizations (EBRD, EIB, KfW, AFD, etc)		X	X	0		
Regional bodies (RCC, TCS, Energy Community. etc)		0			0	
Bilateral Donors		X	X	X		

Legend: X - primary role / 0 - secondary role

Table: Institutions and Structures in charge per Project Cycle Management phase.

PCM stakeholders include the WB6 governments as represented by their different national administrative bodies (including the NIPAC, NIC, Ministry of Infrastructure, Ministry of Finance, local government units (LGU), and program management units); publicly owned companies; private sector actors; foreign donors; and the five WBIF partner banks (IFI). They are involved in all the six steps of PCM.

In the context of the EIP Flagships, the intricate institutional framework lacks a meaningful mechanism for the direct participation of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) or other Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the LIP project cycle. In theory, the stakeholder groups - such as CSO and Local Government Units (LGU) – are requested by law to be consulted during the: (i) preparation of the National Single Project Pipeline (NSPP), and in other different national consultation mechanisms on the identification and prioritization of infrastructure projects; and in the, (ii) phase of pre-feasibility and feasibility study through the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA). But as presented above, citizen and even LGUs are excluded from the preparation of NSPP, while ESIA consultations are marred with problems.

As a result, in reality EIP Flagships in Western Balkans are identified, designed, financed, implemented, and operated mainly within the institutional triangle of: (i) Government (PMO, Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Transport / Energy/etc); (ii) of EU Commission (on projects that receive IPA grant support, WBIF technical assistance and extension of the Trans- European Transport Network / TEN-T); and of, (iii) IFI (for loan modalities).

Despite this environment, numerous local CSOs persist in representing and safeguarding the interest of the citizens, identifying instances of poor LIP governance leading to increased costs for WB6 countries. The media is increasingly exposing risks and failures related to integrity in various project phases.

Beyond their LIP monitoring role, CSOs are hold a critical mass of knowledge on many activity sectors, key reforms, and accession negotiations chapters. Their work on the ground is crucial for enriching and complementing the policy-making processes across sectors, and in almost all the PCM stages. Locally-based CSOs have a vested interest – “skin in the game” - in the efficiency and impact of EU financial aid as well as its sustainability. The input of civil society should become a systemic component of the local contribution of infrastructure projects.

#### *Panelists:*

- Ilir Beqaj, Director General, State Agency for Strategic Programming and Aid Coordination, Albania
- Michael Voegele, Deputy Head of Unit of WS Regional Programmes, Economic Investment Plan at European Commission's, DG NEAR (online)
- Andrea Cascone, Adriatic and Western Balkans Director, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Italy
- Aleksandar Kovacevic, Member of the Forum for International Relations of the European Movement in Serbia
- Stela Ademi, Programme Manager, Cooperation and Development Institute
- Ana Krstinovska, President, Estima, North Macedonia

#### *Discussants:*

- Albert Kolgeci, Head of Division at Permanent Secretariat of Transport Community Treaty;
- Zlatozara Stoilova, Project Manager at Konrad Adenauer Bulgaria / Burgas Connectivity Forum;

- Daniel Shekerletov, Permanent representation of Bulgaria to the EU (online);
- Ilir Basha – Principal Banker, EBRD;
- Dajana Cvjetkovic, Project Manager at the Center for Civil Society Promotion, CPCD BiH;
- Alban Dafa, Researcher, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies.

## ...on SEE6 – EU Convergence

The SEE6 and EU Cohesion policy was the leitmotif of “SEE6 – EU Convergence Highlights” roundtable. EU’s solidarity with SEE6 is indispensable for the Balkans region countries to secure their reform-induced achievements towards EU membership, speed up their growth rates, and fulfil obligations that result from adoption of the *acquis*. Moreover, Cohesion policy and cohesion funds are required to compensate the negative effects stemming from the opening of SEE6 local markets to a much developed and competitive EU Single Market.

Participation in Cohesion policy is SEE6 investment in its long-term European future. In the context of Enlargement, convergence through Cohesion policies means for SEE6 and EU to work together sooner rather than later. This demands strategic thinking and coordination at all levels between WB6 and EU stakeholders and urgent inclusion of SEE6 into the EU debate on the future of the Cohesion Policy.

We are still three years away from presentation of the proposal on the post-27 Cohesion policy. To start the planning process, the existing SEE6 Cross-Border Cooperation and EU INTERREG programmes can be used as pilots. Cross Border programmes can be used as a transitional step towards full coverage from EU Cohesion funds for the SEE6 territory. Innovative elements can be introduced such as use of Cohesion elements to tackle competition from Belt and Road Initiative, to encourage near-shoring, to support smart specialization, etc.

The specific funds can either be part of EU Cohesion funds or a specific non-IPA budget line earmarked for SEE6 that is allocated and managed with the same rules and procedures as Cohesion Funds. The allocation formula can be reviewed to give specific weight to proper SEE6 indicators aligned with the Enlargement reforms, Regional Cooperation targets, the Economic and Investment Plan and Energy Transition, or Growth Plan conditionality.

The biggest net contributing Member States to the EU budget are the same that participate in the Berlin Process - i.e. Germany, France, Italy and Austria. In practical terms, the role of those engaged and neighbouring EU member states becomes very important in territorial cooperation programs and projects between EU and SEE6. Being it through Interreg or through bilateral cooperation there are many examples of hands-on involvement of engaged MS in concrete and tangible projects in SEE6.

Convergence calls in the concept of Solidarity. While EU conditionality is embedded in SEE6 accession methodology and applied politics, economy, legal reform or financial support, Solidarity directly contributes to development, stability, resilience, growth and convergence of a territory.

IPA is not designed for convergence, but for preparing SEE6 to be ready to converge. Convergence funds are received after EU membership. But why not starting the convergence right now? The newly proposed Growth Plan is a necessary step in this direction but its timeline, financial power and governance mechanisms make sense only if it prepares the countries to participate in Cohesion Policies after 2027.

Moreover carrot & stick conditionality is outdated. IPA funds are irrelevant for meaningful regional growth and convergence. Leveraged EIP loan mechanism and project selection while designed for growth, are not adapted to SEE6 development needs as they follow project financing logic. Moreover they directly impact the SEE6 public debts level and nowadays they meet with fierce competition from 3<sup>rd</sup> parties.

Today SEE6 has been already included in EU policy planning (see its inclusion in TEN-T Western Balkan corridor). Its institutions participate in EU programs such as Single

Market ones or Interreg. EU budget lines other than IPA are open to SEE6 countries to finance their infrastructure such as Connecting Europe Facility.

Participation into the EU Cohesion policies is not needed only for a speedier convergence with the EU. To face frequent negative shocks, deal with mega trends (digitalisation, the AI upcoming, costs of green transition, rising disparity and inequalities, dealing with permanent crisis situation), SEE6 need EU solidarity.

*Panelists:*

- Fatmir Bytyqi, Deputy Prime Minister in charge of Economic Affairs, Coordination of Economic Sectors and Investments, North Macedonia – online
- Giorgio Silli, State Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Italy
- Zdenko Lucić, State Secretary, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Croatia
- Gilles Kittel, Team Leader – IPA, Enlargement Negotiations and EUSAIR, DG REGIO, European Commission
- Ardian Hackaj, Director of Research, Cooperation and Development Institute.

*Discussants:*

- Wouter Zweers, Research Fellow at Clingendael Institute;
- Elisabetta Bucci, National Coordinator for San Marino in EUSAIR, Department of Foreign Affairs of San Marino;
- Giuseppe Rubino, Director of Special Structure Territorial Cooperation of Puglia region;
- Ivan Neirotti, European Youth Forum;
- Jadranka Ivanova, Institute for Good Governance and Policy in Environment and Climate Change (IPECC) Skopje, North Macedonia;
- Kori Udovicki, President of the Governing Board, Center for Advanced European Studies.

**Note**

The results of Tirana Connectivity Forum 2023 will be conveyed at the pre-summit European Political Community (EPC) think tank forum in Granada with regard to the Connectivity theme; and at the Civil Society and Think Tanks Forum of the Berlin Process in Tirana with regard to the CSO engagement in democratic life at every level of governance.



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