A VISION FOR TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNANCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Western Balkan Network on Territorial Governance | TG-WeB |

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This position paper reflects input and feedback gathered from members of the Western Balkan Network on Territorial Governance.

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*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

Table of Contents

Preamble

The proposed vision of territorial development and governance in the Western Balkans is the result of an interactive workshop held in May 2019 with the members of the Western Balkan Network on Territorial Governance (TG-WeB)[1]. As such, the vision reflects the opinion of the network, with individual perspectives being well-balanced towards a common outcome. The vision builds synergies with the path and agenda set for the Western Balkans by the Berlin Process and is particularly in line with the Chair's conclusions of the Western Balkan Summit held in Poznań, July 4-5, 2019.

We, the Western Balkan Network on Territorial Governance, propose this vision as a first stepping stone towards a prosperous, cohesive, cooperative, yet diverse, Western Balkans. We believe that the Western Balkan governments should cooperate amongst themselves and with non-state actors towards endorsing a common approach to territorial development and governance for the region.

As a network, we will work and pursue actions that lead towards the accomplishment of the various practical steps that the proposed vision puts forward. The Western Balkan Network on Territorial Governance is a group of civil society organisations and researchers operating in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Kosovo, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Netherlands, Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The network aims to serve as a bottom-up platform, bringing together research and policy-influencing forces, to enable good territorial governance in the Western Balkans, in line with its sustainable development goals and European Union integration ambitions.

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[1] For information on the network please see www.tg-web.eu.

I. Visioning for Territorial Development and Governance in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkan[2] countries, with their regions and cities, face common territorial governance challenges, such as insufficient institutional capacities; limited cooperation between policy sectors, stakeholders, and places; and weak spatial planning (Böhme et al. 2019). In response to these challenges, a variety of good governance initiatives have emerged in the region. The Western Balkan Network on Territorial Governance welcomes these numerous efforts and encourages the adoption of territorial governance approaches (Western Balkan Network on Territorial Governance 2018). Following-up on the position paper put forward by the network in 2018, which aimed at bringing territorial governance as a key issue for the future of the Western Balkans in the European Union, the current document presents a vision for territorial development and governance futures in the Western Balkans.

The vision comprises **three dimensions of a desired development situation, with governance as a fourth standalone, crosscutting dimension.** All aspects of this vision are aimed at the Western Balkan Region, which is diverse but integrated intra-regionally; stable and prosperous; and a place where stakeholders can be trusted. As such, the vision seeks to inspire public authorities in the Western Balkans, as well as non-state actors involved in policy making, to consider territorial governance processes and policies, and encourage cooperation within the Region and towards the rest of Europe. The vision will serve as a guide to the work of the Western Balkan Network on Territorial Governance for the next ten years. Besides proposing a desired future for the Western Balkans, each of the dimensions also addresses key current trends and challenges and introduces a few examples of potential actions and policy orientations that could be initiated to deliver the vision.

- The first dimension is about the quality of life in the Western Balkans. It presents a Western Balkan Region where people want to live and that people want to visit.

- The second dimension focuses on institutional frameworks for public territorial development management. It presents a Western Balkan Region with high levels of institutional and social capital, and strong values. It is open and flexible to diverse ideas, approaches, challenges, and internal socio-historical dynamics.

- The third dimension unveils the Western Balkans as a macro-region in Europe and in the world. It presents a Region that is well integrated and interconnected within Europe and internationally as concerns transport, energy, green infrastructure, and trade networks, and that has a unique place in the international division of labour.

These three dimensions converge into one desired territorial development future for the region. Territorial governance, **as a fourth but also crosscutting dimension**, is centred upon coordination and cooperation as a means to achieve sustainable territorial development. It presents a highly cohesive Western Balkan Region, which supports socio-economic integration and is cooperative to actors within the region and in the EU. The vision can either be taken as a whole, or each dimension can represent an individual, independent path that could receive stronger emphasis and interest from institutions.

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[2] Hereafter referred to also as "the Region".

II. Territorial Development
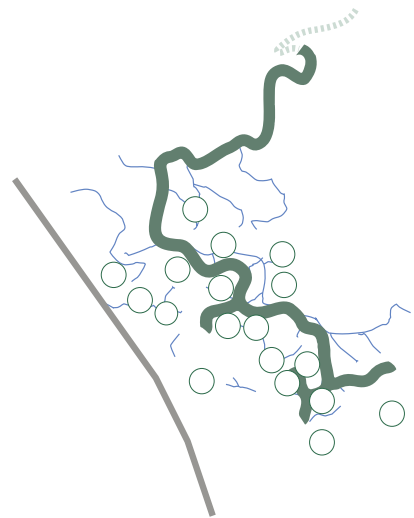## *Regenerative and Inviting Western Balkans*

> Imagine a region that offers cultural and biological diversity, features a thriving green economy, and effectively utilises its human capital. This is a region where people like to stay, live, work, and visit; It is a region that focuses territorial development on creating sustainable settlements and urban-rural linkages; It adopts a regenerative development paradigm, creatively capitalising on its own people, resources, and competitive advantages.

A regenerative development paradigm builds upon a Western Balkans where lively citizen engagement is the key to abundant local creativity and framing integrated policy frameworks to support it.

Development policies that utilise functional interactions between urban and rural areas will be guided by this regenerative paradigm, resulting in improved knowledge of cultures and territories from the very local level to the macroregional scale. The policies for balanced development encourage cooperation between people, territories, and institutions to strengthen the Western Balkans' integration into the wider European context.

A regenerative and inviting development encourages actors to rethink the relationship between humans and nature, supporting an efficient and sustainable use of resources. In this way, cities, small towns, and rural areas are enabled to develop regenerative relationships with the surrounding biological, cultural, and socio-ecological systems.

The Western Balkans is recognised for its outstanding natural and cultural resources, which present the opportunity for an unbeatable offer of numerous and authentic touristic experiences. A diverse climate evolving from Mediterranean to Alpine in very short and accessible distances; beautiful landscapes; natural environments that respond to the needs historical cities and archaeological sites; diversity of local foods and cuisines; and warm hospitality constitute only some of the features that make the region unique and inviting.

However, some challenging trends stand in front of these qualities, opportunities, and visions, and largely oppose the desired future for a regenerative and inviting Western Balkans. Emigration of the highly-educated and brain-drain from the "Western Balkan regions was six times higher than in the rest of the world" in 2010 (Vidovic et al. 2018, p. 44). Emigration data show an increasing tendency for both high profile (doctors, IT engineers, etc.) and skilled labour (nurses, mechanics, plumbers, etc.), progressively worsening the profile of the workforce in the region. Today, one third of the Western Balkans population lives abroad (ibid).

Currently, the urban management and planning of cities, small towns, and rural areas is subordinate to political decision-making, business elites, and profit-making urban projects, therefore lacking visionary approaches and often leading to decision-making that threatens resources and

jeopardises socio-economic and ecological resilience (Western Balkan Network on Territorial Governance 2018). Societal awareness of the need for integrated, collaborative, and regenerative development to revive local economies and create new businesses and job opportunities, is low if not completely absent. There is a large gap between the citizenry and government institutions, resulting in political disregard and civic apathy. On the other hand, there is a growing interest in regional development, increasing political will in favour of city-regions, and a growing trend of urban escapism towards the rural areas surrounding the metropolitan capitals. If properly harnessed, these dynamics could form a solid basis for societal actors to employ approaches and mechanisms that help to turn current trends in favour of a regenerative and inviting Western Balkan vision.

Regenerative Western Balkans
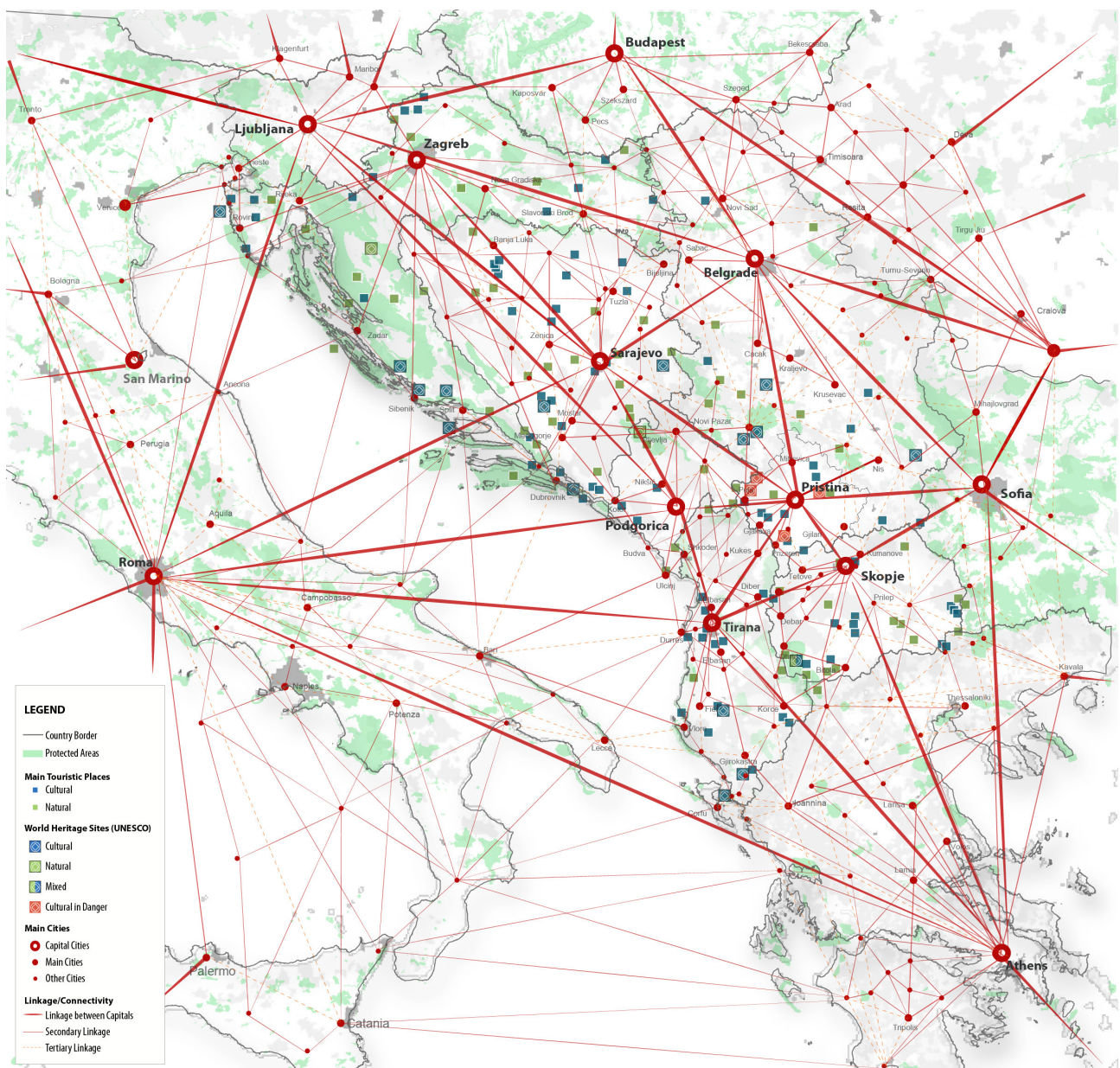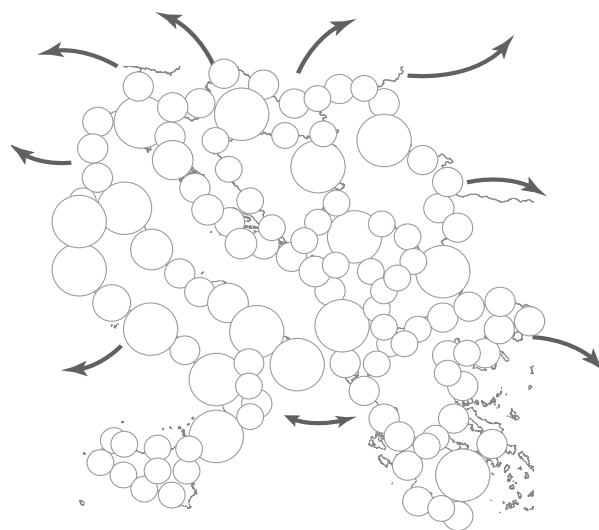
Some concrete actions or policies

- Encourage polycentricity in territory and governance as a normative development objective through spatial planning and particularly through urban-rural cooperation that stimulates economic development. Development of "peri-urban" agriculture and other urban rural or urban-urban value chains should be nurtured;

- Enable city-regions in formation, building on experiences from Europe and based on regional specificities to drive innovation, development, competition and collaboration between and within the regional economies of the Western Balkans;

- Establish and implement an integrated Western Balkan Erasmus policy and programme, aimed at boosting skills and employability; interaction and knowledge exchange; and cooperation, innovation, and applied research in an effort to modernize education, build capacities, and empower youth through training and networking;

- Ensure access to increased finances and investments for developing smart infrastructures to support the delivery of better local services such as health, education, housing, mobility, energy, and communication at central and peripheral locations;

- Focus on projects and initiatives that work with social capital to build competitive and resilient communities, which are enabled to cope with energy and climate change challenges. For example, governments could initiate a collective Western Balkan Resilience and Climate Change Fund, established as a percentage of national budgets for cross-border projects, working on an incremental logic, and matching EU funding support;

- Governments should invest in reversing the trend from brain drain towards brain gain. This will require that coherence is established between the education system and labour market, matching "brain and infrastructure";

- A local-to-regional branding campaign is designed and implemented by governments, businesses, and communities, in partnership, and focuses on key local products and services that improve the image of the Western Balkans and have an economic value-added along regional value chains. Despite political break-up, the Western Balkans keeps up with the future and innovation without neglecting its heritage and the positive aspects of its traditions.

High quality institutional and social capital for inclusive democratic practices

Imagine a Western Balkan Region with high levels of institutional and social capital. All-inclusive democratic decision making is common place and follows the implementation of participatory, transparent, stable, accountable, responsive, dialogic, and place-based policy-making. The management of territorial development adheres to principles of circularity, sustainability, and entrepreneurship, and is carried out through innovative institutional practices.

Strengthening the quality of institutions and social capital and introducing inclusive democratic practices places the open and collaborative society at the centre of the vision for future territorial development in the Western Balkans. This visionary path promotes place-based policies driven by so-called soft-space territorial governance, and accounts for the implications of relational and non-state-centric development geographies through institutional strengthening and better legal frameworks.

Profound transformations characterise the recent history of the institutional and social capital in the Western Balkans. Processes of privatisation, liberalisation, and territorial and fiscal decentralisation have been undertaken with often weak and uncoordinated institutional frameworks and mechanisms. The latter, besides altering procedures and agencies, have in many cases led to institutional and social capital failures in properly responding to contextual and contingent challenges. The lack of institutional coordination and stakeholder cooperation, along with the absence of transparent, place-based, and inclusive approaches, have gradually hampered the fluid democratic practices that have been progressively introduced since the 1990s. Consolidating high quality institutional and social capital are both hampered and facilitated by a heterogeneous set of both internal and external factors. Impediments mainly depend upon:

- domestic political will – the (lack of) will of political representatives to introduce open, transparent, and legitimated democratic procedures;

- level of synchronisation of national legal frameworks and priorities among the Western Balkan countries, aimed at instituting a functional region while adopting place-based local policies;

- institutional capacity of local actors to proactively undertake the required processes of change, currently immobilized as they have a sort of "reactive attitude"; and, last but not least,

- maturity of domestic social capital – poor social awareness of the importance of multilevel governance and inclusive democratic procedures for enabling territorial development, combined with a lack of skills and knowhow resulting from alarming brain-drain and skilled labour out-migration.

The importance of achieving higher levels of institutional and social capital in the Western

Balkans has been strongly recognized by European Commission (2018) in the document "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans", which states that the Western Balkans needs to strengthen institutional capacities and governance mechanisms by establishing inclusive, structured dialogues at all levels and, above all, between countries.

To counteract the above-mentioned impediments, focus should be placed on:

- the propulsion and empowerment of the younger generations towards a direct and comprehensive involvement in local democratic issues and processes, as well as in global debates and agendas;

- the progressive societal effort towards further education, information, and self-determination;

- the process of integration into the European Union that may act as a driver for enhancing the institutional capital of national, regional, and local authorities towards higher standards of democracy, inclusiveness, and operation.

To enhance the quality of domestic institutional and social capital and to thereby strengthen democratic practices in the Balkans, several actions should happen concurrently at the political, institutional, social and territorial level.

Cooperation and Polycetricity
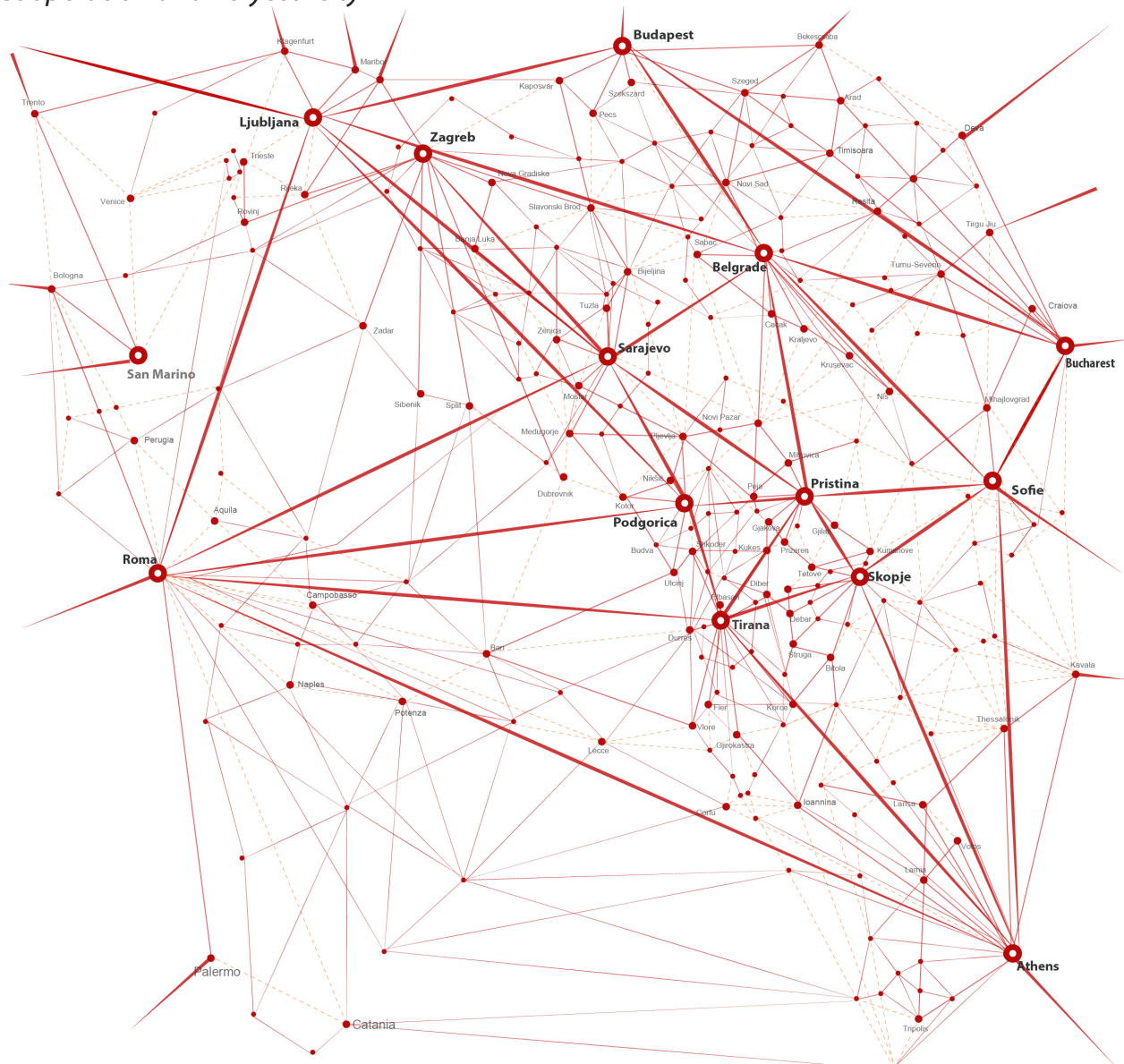
Some concrete actions or policies

Political level: One region, one voice

- Create common political platforms for multi-level dialoguing between state and non-state actors, sharing information and data, approaches, and policy orientations;

- Establish a common foreign policy, especially when it comes to dialogue with the European Union and relations with other international actors that are present in the region.

Institutional level: Common institutions and common rules

- Create common transnational institutional bodies on multi-level and polycentric soft governance that will reconcile and level-up decision-making processes in the region. Soft collaborative governance approaches take the concept of "one region" to the next level by repealing polarized and politically driven conducts of nation states.

- Formally establish the macro-regional territorial arena in the Western Balkans Territorial Governance Observatory (WeBGO), which carries out structured and targeted research, and develops spatial visions, strategies, and frameworks recognized by the respective countries to inform policy dialogues and policy making. WeBGO should be financially supported by the Western Balkans Research Foundation, a proposal dating back to the Trieste Summit in 2017 and reconfirmed in the Western Balkan Summit held in Poznan, Poland during 2019;

- Encourage and empower commons governance for natural resources and, at an urban level, for public space and other aspects requiring collective action. Communities in the cross-border areas govern together their natural resources in common, such as forests, pastures, watersheds, and fisheries, respecting functionality as well as local legislation imposed by administrative borders.

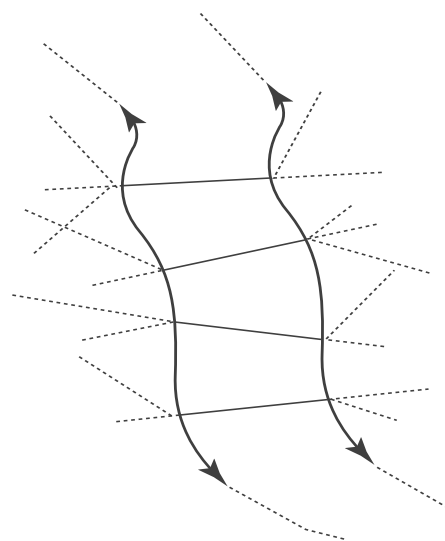*Territorial level: Guaranteeing territorial integrity*

- Devote EU and domestic funds for developing more transnational projects on specific regional sensitivities, besides strengthening cross-border cooperation. This fosters internal economic and cultural integration. Drafting a Balkans Climate Change Adaptation Strategy with concrete, fundable measures for implementation could be one example among many;

- Undertake regional integration projects focused on empowering community ties and youth interaction as a means to even out divergences, build up cohesion, and mitigate the cost of territorialism. Such projects could deal with common space-specific challenges, as well as arts and cultural heritage.

A polycentric and interconnected Western Balkans

Imagine that the Western Balkans is well-connected regionally and within Europe through territorial and infrastructural continuities. A borderless mobility network that supports intermodal, sustainable, and smart transport is developed and links centres of various functions and hierarchies in a cascade fashion. Interconnected energy and information networks, together with complementary and diversified sources of energy and green infrastructures, increase the resilience and functional efficiency of the region.

Major transport corridors are completed, including connections between medium-sized cities. Orient/East-Med (OEM), a key trans-European transport corridor, efficiently connects various countries and economic centres starting from North Germany. Routing through the Western Balkans (Serbia and North Macedonia) is very efficient, due to current connections in place (Belgrade – Skopje – Thessaloniki), and ongoing investments are made to finalise the missing segments in these connections. OEM also easily approaches the ports of the Black Sea and railway branch lines that lead to Koper and Rijeka in the Adriatic (Beckmann et al. 2019). Parallel to OEM, the Adriatic highway, dedicated primarily to tourism, connects the North of Europe through Zagreb and Split to Dubrovnik, Budva, Shkodër, Tirana, Greece, and Turkey. Transversal connections between the two corridors (Split – Sarajevo – Belgrade – Bucharest; Tirana – Skopje – Sofia; Tirana – Pristina – Niš) complete the existing grid, guaranteeing fast exchanges and flows of goods and people, access to Adriatic ports, and, most importantly, connection between urban centres in the region.

Information flows and real-time electronic communication facilitate the interaction of people and businesses, including SMEs, which share ideas, resources, and a labour force. Tourism and agriculture as key sectors make use of the territorial capital, developing and trading niche products that guarantee a competitive share in the international market through their uniqueness. Place-sensitive tourism is boosted, with quality infrastructures and facilities in cities and coastal areas, a network of protected cultural heritage and archaeological sites, historical routes, mountain and forest trails, and authentic experiences in the rural landscapes.

Infrastructure does not only imply airports, roads, ports, and ICT, but also stable energy provision, waste collection systems, and accommodation facilities of any kind. Priority is given to establishing a common and resilient energy network based on renewable and climate-smart resources (i.e. sun, wind, and geo-thermal). This network extends throughout the region, connecting to other European networks, and is self-sufficient for the needs of the local population and economy. Green infrastructures are developed throughout the region, connecting protected areas through green and biodiversity corridors. River valleys classified as geo-parks (for instance Vjosa/ Aoös river from Greece to Albania) provide shelter and habitat for endangered species,

increasing the forest area, connecting ecosystems within and between watersheds, and reinforcing and maintaining the European green belt.

Urban-rural transitions are evened out and a polycentric network of settlements and economic centres is enabled (both from a morphological and functional perspective). Geographically peripheral areas are well-connected with major centres through the infrastructural network and provide services of general interest for people to remain or return to live and develop their economic activities, making use of the valuable territorial capital.

Smooth, direct, and diverse infrastructural connections have the potential to increase cooperation and interaction within the region and with the rest of Europe. Not only would the Balkans be better served, but so would Vienna and Budapest, while connections to Asia's corridors would also be enhanced (Beckmann et al. 2019). However, as Beckmann et al. (2019) point out, there are also shortcomings. These include the traditionally low economic performance of the countries in the area, administrative obstacles, and cross border issues (the countries are not yet EU member states and integration processes are uneven due to varying national reforms progress). The current infrastructural network is inefficient due to missing horizontal links such as with Sarajevo, Split, Dubrovnik, Podgorica, Tirana, and the Albanian ports in the Adriatic and Ionian seas.

Due to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), sea ports in the Balkans are expected to gain more importance. However, Chinese investments need a European response, not merely for geopolitical purposes, but also to make sure that the network better serves the region and Europe, and that proper emphasis is put on institutional and environmental aspects, social standards, and territorial cohesion.

On the other hand, expected rising temperatures (between 1.7 and 2.3 degrees Celsius until 2040) (Vuković and Mandić 2018) and reduced precipitation with stormy episodes of rainfall will cause droughts, and therefore reduced and unstable water flow in the rivers (Gjoka 2018). This will negatively affect current energy sources, which are mainly water-based (ibid). Furthermore, the number of sunny days is expected to increase as well, adding to the high potential of developing solar energy infrastructures. However, caution is needed not to convert productive agricultural land into solar panel farms, requiring stricter regulations especially in rural areas and natural sites. Hence, a balance between use of land and investments in clean energy, guaranteeing the diversification of energy sources, should be established.

The new Trans-Adriatic Gas Pipeline and the new Ionian-Adriatic gas pipeline make the region less dependent on Russian gas, while also increasing infrastructural connectivity to the Asia-EU network.

EU accession may shift the focus of European investments from roads and railways to increasing funds for energy, accessibility, and the environment (EBRD 2018). However, for the Western Balkans, the completion of large infrastructural corridors remains a necessity (European Commission 2015). Road transport accounted for 75% of all freight transport in 2006 (European Environment Agency 2010, p. 115), a small decrease compared to previous years due to increasing shares of rail and air transport. Freight transport in the Western Balkans has risen more than passenger transport, doubling between 2000 and 2017. This increase was greater than the increase in GDP. However, lower overall development along the coast in the Western part of the region and constant emigration reduces the basin of people requiring infrastructure and access.

The population of the Western Balkan countries is expected to decrease by about 14% between 2018 and 2050 (Bankwatch Network 2016) due to emigration, particularly of young people. Intensifying urbanisation

and concentration of people in the capitals and major urban centres will increase pressure on services and the environment in these areas, as well as contribute towards further peripheralization of secondary and tertiary cities. Investments in enhancing connectivity and accessibility may reverse the above trend to a certain degree. Unless these investments are accompanied by investments in social capital and businesses, they will have a limited effect. Current developments have a diverse impact on making the Western Balkans well-connected in Europe and the world. A few examples that help to turn current developments in support of this vision follow below.

Territorial Connectivity [3]

[3] Conceptual map of some of the main Western Balkans corridors for regional & territorial connectivity

Some concrete actions or policies

- Complete Orient/East-Med corridor and prioritise connection through Belgrade – Skopje to Thessaloniki.

- Complete the Adriatic corridor. Connect Split with both Dubrovnik and Sarajevo and extend the corridor to Patra and Athens through Budva, Shkodër, Tirana and Ioannina.

- Build/complete transversal corridors:
   Split – Sarajevo – Belgrade – Bucharest;
   Tirana – Skopje – Sofia;
   Tirana – Pristina – Niš.

- Protect the area corresponding with the European Green Belt, enacting the necessary legislation and supporting local communities through cross-border cooperation projects.

- Create a Western Balkan network of protected ecosystems and landscapes, connected through biodiversity corridors and riparian areas along major rivers, in preparation for the NATURA 2000 network.

- Declare the Vjosa/Aoös river as a geo-park along all of its stream from Greece through Albania to the Adriatic Sea.

- Stop the construction of hydropower plants in the Western Balkan rivers and recuperate important rivers and streams altered by existing HPPs.

- Establish a combined system of solar/wind/geothermal sources of energy, connected to the grid supported by the government financially and/or through environmental assessment studies.

- Liberalise the energy market, incentivise it financially, and support it through the appropriate legal frameworks and bottom-up actions at the individual household or business level to produce energy through alternative renewable sources. This implies an energy exchange between local producers and the network.

III. Territorial governance

Imagine local, regional, and national authorities, and non-state actors in the Western Balkans operating in diverse, polycentric, and multi-level networks, addressing challenges ranging from the very local and place-specific to the regional and macro-regional. This social imaginary – Balkanopolis – strengthens the position of the region in Europe, implying first that the region is well connected internally.

Internal cooperation is essential for territorial governance and development in the Western Balkans, building upon:

- the experience and willingness of state and non-state actors to enable cross-sectoral interaction;

- increased knowledge and institutional capacities for governance;

- collaboration between sectors and community practices for governing commons and rediscovering traditional knowledge;

- societal understanding and acceptance of historical diversities, recognition of path-dependencies, and learning from the past, while making efforts to mitigate and even out the negative effects of territorialism.

Today, the Western Balkans is a heterogeneous European macro-region with numerous commonalities centred mostly around valuable natural resources and cultural-historical aspects. Internal integration is weak and threatened by historical, socio-economic, and geopolitical factors. As a result, territorial development and governance is often challenged by: institutional corruption, informal economic and land development, weak and often ineffective participation in public processes, and low awareness of environmental issues.
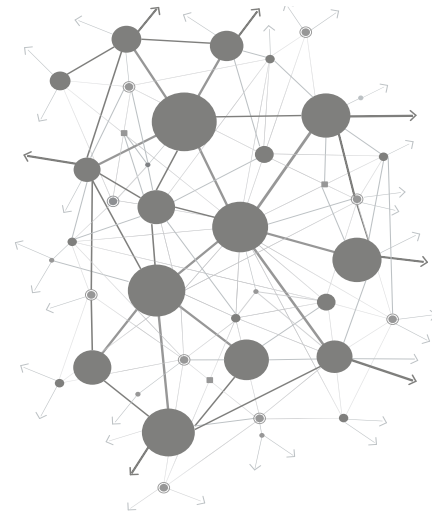
Integration into the European Union is a common goal shared by Western Balkan countries. This integration will come with more governance levels being introduced, power decentralised sub-nationally, emphasis placed on functional regions and shared functions beyond administrative boundaries, representative democracies becoming increasingly controversial, and growing inequalities and peripheralities.

To deal with these challenging trends, Western Balkan countries need to improve their mutual cooperation and support the creation of networks on common issues, problems, and actions, both in a top-down and bottom-up fashion. Countries also need to "build a sustainable and comprehensive reconciliation process" (Madhi et al. 2019, p. 3). Existing networks of non-state actors such as academia, civil society, media, and experts should be strengthened and empowered The establishment of new networks should also be promoted, together with the cooperation of public authorities.

Networking and cooperation among experts from various Balkan countries is a very challenging task as networks are expected not only to understand and fulfil the requirements of a highly globalised territorial development, but to intrinsically understand the endogenous needs of local societies. Experts are usually framed or influenced by

the top-down planning and development approach, though few successful examples of collaborative processes (promoted by international bodies such as UN-Habitat, GIZ, USAID, etc. as well as by local grassroots initiatives) are in place and could serve as learning cases. This internal cooperation and networking should embed itself into the following policy domains:

− Cross-border territorial cooperation between territories experiencing direct mutual impact will be practiced not only in formal but also in informal ways, improving everyday life and overcoming organisational and administrative barriers.

− Common economic policy will be implemented with diverse advantages for co-production, commercial exchange, and promotion of local products and services. Agriculture, industry, and tourism will rely upon the joint policies and mechanisms that support economic development at the macro-regional, national, regional, and local levels.

− Common environmental policy taking into account climate change will be based on natural features shared by countries and regions and common adaptation plans and actions. Air, water, soil, hazards, and climate justice shall be the main topics for exchanges of experience and increase common knowledge in order to improve practices in border areas and beyond.

− Infrastructure is the core precondition which facilitates the cooperation necessary to establish quality linkages for transport and telecommunication. Wise use of renewable energy, while based on local solutions, shall be planned in common, protecting common water resources threatened by hydro-power systems.

− Exchanges and common activities in social and cultural policy are in favour of improved general cooperation, having repercussions on territorial governance.

− Urban centres as nodes of polycentric regional development will represent the engines of multiple activities, leading to balanced regional development while valorising specific potentials and making the entire region stronger and competitive on a European level.

Polycentric Governance
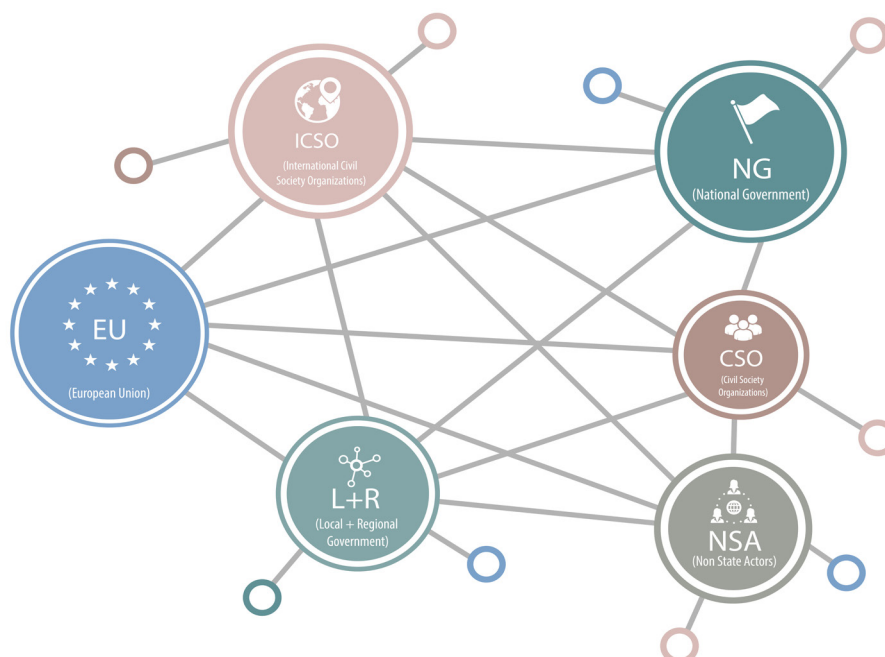
Some concrete actions or policies

- Governments and non-state actors cooperate and introduce territorial governance in the Regional Cooperation Council mandate;

- State and non-state actors undertake common cross-border and transnational planning activities for national territories, watersheds, common functional areas, and cross-border regions. Common awareness raising campaigns on the benefits of participatory planning, and adaptive planning for climate change are undertaken, targeting the general public, policy- and decision-makers, youth, as well as local experts.

- EU programs that support cooperation increase funding for networking initiatives within the region, which develop at various stakeholder levels and endorse the objectives/tasks of functional cooperation between places, actors, and sectors.

- Cooperate at the government level on the topic of illegal land development as a problem specific to the Balkans and less present in other parts of Europe. According to the Vienna Declaration (2004), exchange may be a step towards the solution, with visible improvements in practice by 2035.

- State and non-state actors undertake initiatives that enable a conceptual shift from the macro-region of problems towards the macro-region of potentials.

- Include Western Balkan countries in ESPON programming and in the process leading to the EU Territorial Agenda post 2020.

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