



A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO MACROREGIONAL COLLABORATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS



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Introduction

This policy brief (PB) outlines a strategic approach for building macroregional collaboration between both Western Balkan (WB) countries and other European states. Macroregional collaboration is one mechanism for promoting European Union (EU) integration and accession processes in the WBs. Through participation in macroregional collaboration activities, public authorities and other public and private actors from across non-EU states become increasingly entangled in personal and institutional relationships with EU member states, which socialises them to EU norms and procedures. Enhanced macroregional collaboration and EU accession are viewed as important for resolving some of the key challenges facing the WB Region, including promoting political stability, decreasing ethno-nationalism, settling territorial conflicts, and increasing economic growth.

This PB is split into two sections; the first part explores existing macroregional collaboration between WB countries and other European states, highlighting the main challenges and benefits of existing cooperation structures. The second part outlines a strategic approach to building macroregional collaboration, before providing reflections on the future direction of macroregional cooperation for the WB Region. The PB is targeted at policymakers and practitioners across different governance levels (i.e. national, regional, and local levels) in WB countries who are interested in building and participating in effective macroregional cooperation initiatives.

The information outlined in this PB are based on a review and assessment of academic and policy literature on macroregional collaboration in the WBs and Europe. This data is supplemented by semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews conducted in 2024 with 19 stakeholders from across the WBs who are actively involved in macroregional collaboration activities. The interviewees included representatives from the Regional Cooperation Council, national governments and local authority representatives, NGOs, academia, and international political organisations. The interviews focused on discussing the strengths and weaknesses of existing macroregional collaboration structures and the future direction of macroregional cooperation for the WBs.

1. What is macroregional collaboration?

The term “macroregional collaboration” refers to a range of transnational and cross-border frameworks, policies, and projects that promote collaboration and cooperation between two or more countries that are close geographically and share common interests (Moodie et al 2025 forthcoming). The notion of macroregional collaboration has become more prominent in policy and academic discourse since the formalisation of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) in 2009, which represented a new governance tool for promoting EU integration and cohesion (Gänzle and Kern, 2016). An EU ‘macro-region’ is ‘an area including territory from a number of different countries or regions associated with one or more common features or challenges’ (European Commission, 2009). The European Commission note that macroregional collaboration is characterised by: 1) an integrated framework involving EU Member States and third countries in the same geographical area; 2) who work together to address common challenges and opportunities; and 3) benefit from collaborating through strengthened cooperation and enhanced economic, social and territorial cohesion (European Commission, 2013). Ultimately, macroregional collaboration aims to substantiate the goal of enhanced territorial cohesion introduced by Article 174 of the Treaty of Lisbon.

2. Existing macroregional collaboration in the Western Balkans

WB countries are not disconnected islands, but macroregional connections already exist and continue to develop between WB countries and other Eastern European and Adriatic-Ionian states. Except for Albania, WB countries have already experienced union under the ex-Yugoslavia. Path

dependencies pertaining to societal relations, cultural identity, physical infrastructure and economic links remain from that period. A new wave of regional cooperation is represented by the Open Balkan Initiative introduced in 2021. The Open Balkan Initiative, involving Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, is an example of this renewed cooperation framework, which seeks to facilitate trade, enhance freedom of movement for people and goods, and ultimately create a more interconnected regional market. Macroregional cooperation between WB countries and other European states is also commonplace, fostered through EU accession (see the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)) proceedings under the Berlin Process, and the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans adopted by the European Commission in 2023. There is a positive attitude amongst policy and decision-makers across the WBs to participate in macroregional collaborative activities.

A review on ongoing macroregional collaboration activities, outlined in Table 1, identifies different organisations, platforms, and networks that are relevant to promoting macroregional cooperation in the WBs. These are classified as 1) Transnational political-based collaboration: the existing platforms for cooperation are considered top-down, too formal, or too political to be able to establish more hands-on dialogue on issues of common interest. 2) Transnational project-based collaboration: these are too often steered by ‘clients’ or funders’ demands, based on perceptions of what the region needs from the outside, rather than focusing on issues of genuine local interest. And 3) Transnational bottom-up collaboration: these can play a central role in promoting place-based policymaking yet are often ignored or lack the instruments to make a significant and continuous impact.

Table 1: Types of macroregional collaborative structures involving WB countries

ORGANISATION/ PLATFORM/ NETWORK	DESCRIPTION
Transnational political-based collaboration	
Berlin Process	High-level intergovernmental forum initiated by Germany involving WB6, EU Member States, UK, and EU institutions. Aims to foster regional cooperation and support the WB's EU perspective.
Open Balkan Initiative	Initiative involving Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia aimed at creating a common economic zone based on the EU's four freedoms (goods, services, capital, people).
Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) (Political Interface)	Regional cooperative framework for South East Europe (including WB6), successor to Stability Pact. Operational arm often linked to political processes like SEECP and Berlin Process.
Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC)	Intergovernmental forum including Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia alongside Black Sea littoral states. Aims to foster interaction, peace, stability, prosperity through cooperation in various areas.
Council of Europe (CoE) (Political / Normative)	Pan-European organization (including all WB6) dedicated to upholding human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.
Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) (Trade Focus)	Trade agreement among WB6 + Moldova, aiming to enhance trade, eliminate barriers, attract investment through harmonized rules based on EU/WTO standards.
Energy Community (Regulatory)	International organisation bringing EU and neighbours (incl. WB6) together to create an integrated energy market based on EU rules
Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the Western Balkans (EU Funding Strategy)	EU strategy (2020) aiming to spur long-term economic recovery, support green/digital transition, foster regional integration and convergence with EU. Mobilises up to €9bn EU grants and aims to leverage up to €20bn investments via guarantees.
Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) (EU Funding Mechanism)	Joint initiative of EU, International Financial Institutions (IFIs), bilateral donors, and WB beneficiaries. Main vehicle for implementing the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP). Blends EU grants (IPA) with loans from IFIs (EIB, EBRD, WB etc.) and contributions from bilateral donors to finance strategic investments, primarily infrastructure, and provide technical assistance.
Transnational project-based collaboration	
EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) Project-Based (Macro-Regional Strategy)	The EUSAIR (2019) is a macroregional strategy promoting cooperation across the region. It addresses shared challenges in blue growth, environmental quality, tourism, and connectivity, aiming to foster sustainable development, EU integration, and regional territorial cohesion.
EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) Project-Based (Macro-Regional Strategy)	The EUSDR(2011), is a macroregional framework involving several countries spanning from Germany to the Black Sea. It promotes coordinated action across a diverse region through four pillars: connectivity, environment, prosperity, and governance.
Interreg Programmes (IPA ADRI-ON, Danube, NEXT MED, etc.) Project-Based (Cross-Border/Transnational Cooperation)	Interreg Programmes, such as IPA ADRION and Danube, are EU funding instruments that support cross-border and transnational cooperation, involving WB countries alongside EU regions. These programmes explicitly target both governance improvements, like enhancing institutional capacity and supporting EUSAIR governance, and the green transition, funding numerous projects focused on climate action, clean energy, circular economy, biodiversity, and sustainable mobility.

ESPON (European Spatial Planning Observation Network) - Research Project-Based (Research/Network)	ESPON is an EU research programme providing evidence on territorial development trends to inform policy-making. Although WB countries are not formal members, they are included in specific ESPON research projects. This research offers valuable comparative insights, identifying WB spatial governance systems and highlighting challenges related to state control, potential corruption, and informality, which are relevant to both governance and environmental outcomes.
EU Horizon Europe Project-Based (EU Research Programme)	Horizon Europe is the EU's key funding programme for research and innovation, tackling climate change, helps to achieve the UN's SDGs and boosts the EU's competitiveness and growth. Horizon Europe funds research and knowledge exchange projects across WB and EU countries e.g., GreenFORCE project – one channel to fuel knowledge exchange on more specific issues, re. green transitions, planning, governance, etc.
EUKI (European Climate Initiative) Project-Based (EU Climate Initiative)	The EUKI is a funding instrument from the German Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK), implemented by GIZ, financing cross-border climate action projects in EU Member States and WB candidate countries. It supports projects across various climate topics, including policy development, energy transition, just transition, and sustainable mobility, focusing on practical solutions, capacity building, and network creation.
UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) Project-Based (UN Agency)	UNDP works in about 170 countries and territories, helping to eradicate poverty, reduce inequalities and exclusion, and build resilience so countries can sustain progress. As the UN's development agency, UNDP plays a critical role in helping countries achieve the SDGs. UNDP connects countries with the knowledge, resources and networks they need to achieve development breakthroughs.
National development funds (bilateral co-operation) Project-Based (Bilateral Agency)	Bilateral development funds, such as Germany's GIZ, Sweden's Sida, and Swiss Cooperation (SDC/SECO), operate as key project-based partners in the WBs, implementing technical cooperation and funding initiatives aligned with their national priorities. Collectively, these agencies provide targeted technical assistance and project funding that contribute to advancing both governance reforms and green transition objectives across the region.
Transnational bottom-up collaboration	
Network of Associations of Local Authorities of Southeast Europe (NALAS)	Network of 13 national associations of local authorities from SEE, including WB6. Aims to promote decentralisation, local self-government, and improve local services.
Western Balkan Network on Territorial Governance (TG-WeB)	TG-WeB is a voluntary platform established in 2018. It unites researchers, civil society organisations, and academic institutions from the WBs and EU member states. TG-WeB aims to enhance territorial governance practices in the WBs, aligning them with EU standards and facilitating the region's integration into EU frameworks.
Open Society Foundations - Western Balkans (OSF-WB) Bottom-Up (Foundation)	Part of the global Open Society Foundations network, supporting civil society, democracy, human rights, and social justice in the WB.
CEE Bankwatch Network Bottom-Up (CSO Network)	International network of CSOs monitoring public finance (IFIs, EU funds) in Central/Eastern Europe, including WB.
Other project-based Civil Society Organisation (CSO) networks in the WB	Diverse CSO networks are actively engaged in the GAWB, specialising in areas like civil society in general (e.g., BCSDN), environmental monitoring (e.g., CEE Bankwatch), research (e.g., TG-WeB, GreenFORCE), capacity building (e.g., ENV.net, REC), local governance (NALAS), and journalism (EJN). These networks play crucial roles in implementing the GAWB and supporting EU integration through monitoring, advocacy, research, and capacity building.

3. The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans - an exercise of experimental macroregional collaboration?

The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB), endorsed in 2020, appears to be a pilot exercise in EU macroregional strategy in the WBs under the climate and environmental policy themes central to the EU Green Deal. Firstly, the overarching green agenda theme and corresponding sub-themes, are still in their relative infancy, meaning there are high levels of uncertainty, volatility, and a lack of knowledge on different climate and environment related topics. This context creates a need for experimental macroregional governance approaches based on multi-actor deliberative dialogue in which participants can share knowledge and learn from each other's experiences in the preparation of new policy frameworks. Secondly, the GAWB has an underlying experimental macroregional governance logic based on the preparation of a broad overarching strategic framework complemented by measurable indicators used as a structure for implementation and monitoring. Thirdly, the GAWB also respects the 3 no's logic behind EU macro-regional strategies. There were no new institutions created to guide the development of the GAWB. The overarching GAWB framework and Action Plan were created within existing RCC institutional structures. An extensive consultation process was coordinated by the RCC working in collaboration with national authorities from WB countries, regional organisations active in policy areas covered by the GAWB, international financial institutions (IFIs), and civil society organisations (CSOs), with the support of the European Commission (EC), Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). The GAWB resulted in no additional costs as it was financially supported through existing EU funds including the IPAIII, the Western Balkans Investment Framework, and the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+). Finally, the GAWB gave rise to no specific or binding EU legislation for the WB Region.

4. What are the challenges of macroregional collaboration in the region?

Macroregional collaborations are complex multi-actor processes beset by challenges and obstacles, including:

- **Low levels of political support:** The political will and support of national level actors are central in the development of macroregional collaboration. There is often a lack of strong political leadership and commitment to promote macroregional collaboration, especially if cooperation does not come with its own funding resources.
- **Weak stakeholder engagement:** Macroregional collaboration has been criticised for being predominantly top-down and driven by intergovernmental discussion rather than a bottom-up stakeholder engagement. This is exacerbated by an unwillingness of national level actors to devolve responsibility for the development of collaborative activities to regional and local levels institutions and actors. Many relevant actors also lack the time and resources to participate, including SMEs, NGOs, and other societal groups.
- **Limited funding:** The lack of a formal funding framework devoted to macroregional collaboration means that agreed goals and objectives can only be met if there is a close alignment with existing funding structures at EU, national, regional and local levels.
- **Complex multi-level governance coordination:** Different national level legal, regulatory, and administrative frameworks can create obstacles for collaboration. Strict public procurement laws and regulations make macroregional collaboration demanding. Inflexible rules are a barrier in the development of targeted macroregional implementation projects. Procurement rules and regulations are hard to overcome and there is no political will to change procedures and assist implementation. This differentiation can slow the development and implementation of macroregional collaborative activities.

5. What are the benefits of macroregional collaboration?

Many of today's main policy priorities transcend national borders (e.g., pollution, transport infrastructure, etc.), therefore, countries can increase their capacities to solve shared challenges by working together. The challenges of macroregional collaboration can be offset by the benefits and advantages of cooperating with other countries, including:

▣ **Increasing cohesion:** macroregional collaboration is an important mechanism for promoting EU policy alignment and cohesion. This contributes towards EU integration processes and can increase the leverage of WB countries in negotiating with the EU on the accession conditions and shape the focus of international donors towards the domestic priorities. Collaboration promotes territorial cohesion and supports neighbourhood region building, which can speed up policy and spatial integration between different countries.

- **Strengthening multi - level networks:** Working together can strengthen multi-level governance networks both vertically (between government tiers/ geographical scales) and horizontally (between stakeholders and across sectors), while also strengthening existing networks or building new ones.
- **Enhancing place-based policymaking:** Macroregional collaboration provides a framework for encompassing international and supranational strategies and agendas, ensuring they become more targeted at relevant territorial scales.
- **Building social capital and knowledge:** Working together increases levels of social capital, respect, and trust between actors through knowledge exchange and learning. Sharing successful and failed experiences increases institutions and non-state actors capacities to address issues of common interest.

6. A strategic approach to macroregional collaboration building in the Western Balkans

Based on what was discussed, above, this section of the policy provides a practical step-by-step strategic guide to macroregional collaboration building. Policymakers and practitioners must ask themselves a series of essential questions when determining whether to participate in macroregional cooperation activities. The following five key strategic questions should be addressed to determine the focus and direction of macroregional collaboration in the WBs.

1. **Why do we need to collaborate?** There must be a clear need for collaboration, which can act as both the catalyst and driver that incentivises and binds countries to collaborate in a macroregional context. There are several factors that can drive macroregional collaboration processes, including 1) common political ambitions in the international arena e.g., in relation to the EU accession 2) common socio-economic and environmental challenges; 3) shared regional development and growth opportunities; and 4) establishing a critical mass and economies of scale in areas where working alone is not a viable option due to limited infrastructure and finances. The identification of a clear need for cooperation is essential to ensure the full and sustainable commitment and support for collaborative activities amongst participants.
2. **What is the appropriate scale for collaboration?** The geographic and territorial scale of collaboration needs to be determined at the outset. The challenge and policy theme should guide the geographic and territorial focus of collaboration. Depending on the context, policymakers must decide whether bilateral or multi-country collaboration is needed and whether cooperation should be focused solely on the WBs or involve other surrounding and neighbouring European countries.

7. The future of macroregional collaboration in the Western Balkans

A fundamental issue identified during discussions with WB stakeholders is that the notion of the “Western Balkans” as a bloc constitutes a fictitious geography in the eyes of citizens, organisations, and political entities alike. It is perceived that the term has been imposed on the region externally, mostly in connection with the EU accession process and foreign aid funding mechanisms targeting the region. Without explicitly designating the WBs as an EU Macroregion, the EU has tended to group the six Balkan countries via common policy frameworks, such as the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and the Western Balkans Investment Framework. Consequently, the term “Western Balkans” has become normalised in international policy settings around supranational investment programmes and support instruments but remains an artificial construct outside this context. In contrast, regional identity seems to transcend this limited territorial boundary to include other different geographic constellations (e.g., the broader Balkan region, Eastern European and Adriatic-Ionian linkages). The notion of the “Western Balkans”, therefore, needs to be understood within the context of EU accession, but manifestations of macroregional collaboration need not be limited to this narrow geographic delineation.

There is little enthusiasm for the concept of an EU Macroregional Strategy for the Western Balkans, as there is no political support for transnational activities without funding or those that only promote knowledge-sharing projects. A question for WB countries is whether they wish to be part of an EU Macroregion for the WBs or a broader geographical unit along the lines of the original South-East European Cooperation Process or in the more recently constituted European Union Strategy for Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR). In the event of joining the EU, maintaining the WB6 aggregation via a newly emerging strategy for macroregional collaboration may reinforce the perceptions of these countries as separate from the rest of Europe and other negative connotations, such as political instability, economic underdevelopment, and conflicts.

Moreover, there is a range of existing

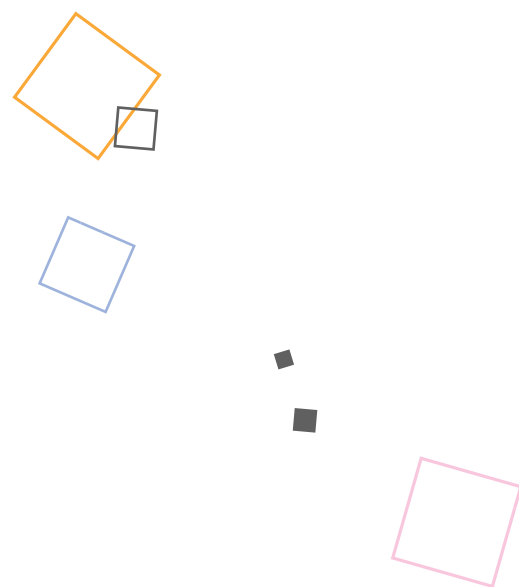
macroregional structures available for transnational and cross-border cooperation activities that can strengthen cooperation, networking, and cohesion, including the RCC, the EU macroregional strategies for the Adriatic-Ionian, mentioned above and the Danube Regions, and Interreg programmes. Different forms of macroregional collaboration can become more institutionalised at different political and governance levels, as well as promoted more informally at practitioner and non-state levels. Based on discussions with various stakeholders, the best course of action would be to build on existing structures depending on the purpose of collaboration. The Berlin Process and the Open Balkan Initiative are considered useful platforms in the short term for the purpose of EU accession. However, it would be beneficial to break away from the WB6 logic in the long run, not to reinforce the perception of the region as alienated from the rest of Europe. EUSAIR and EUSDR could better deliver on the macroregional collaboration ambitions of WB countries in relation to different policy themes and local priorities (e.g., transport routes and infrastructure, conservation of the Danube River, and trade across the Adriatic and Mediterranean seas). Simultaneously, the EU and public authorities in the WBs could support other forms of bottom-up macroregional collaboration building, particularly at local levels (e.g., in the academic community, with NGOs and civil society groups, and amongst other practitioners like industries and SMEs).

The search for narrow transnational and cross-border functional areas between WB countries might be a more fruitful alternative to grander macroregional strategy plans. These functional collaborations could be built up incrementally through existing macroregional structures, beginning with small-scale collaborations based on common territorial and thematic challenges and opportunities, and then seeing if these networks can grow into more formal institutionalised collaboration structures which can be integrated into the EU space. The nature and type of macroregional collaborative pathways the WBs choose to go down should largely be determined by the answers to the strategic questions outlined above.

ABOUT THIS POLICY BRIEF

This policy brief was developed by GreenFORCE, a Horizon Europe project which aims at fostering excellence in the “Western Balkans’ green transition” and scientific research capacities of Co-PLAN, Institute for Habitat Development (Albania), Center for Economic Analyses (North Macedonia), and University of Belgrade, Faculty of Geography (Serbia). In twinship with Nordregio - Nordic Institute for Regional Development and Planning - (Sweden) and Politecnico di Torino (Italy), these organisations work closely to produce territorial knowledge through exploratory research and institutional learning.

The policy brief builds on research conducted as part of the project examining existing macroregional collaboration activities involving WB countries, focusing on assessing the challenges and benefits of collaboration, and exploring the potential future directions of macroregional collaboration for the WBs.



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Further reading

Moodie, J.R., Giacometti, A., Itänen, M. & Berisha, E.
(2025) Macroregional Pathways for the Green Agenda
in the Western Balkans.

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