

# Chapter One

## European Union and Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans

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### Introduction

This chapter will analyse the relationship between the European Union (EU) and the Western Balkans, starting with regional cooperation and supported by different instruments such as Stabilisation and Association Process for the Western Balkans and aimed at political, institutional, and economic integration and the reconciliation between these countries. The EU's regional cooperation process has been the crucial institutional support for Western Balkan countries to overcome their previous historical challenges. Furthermore, the Regional ownership has indicated the readiness of the Western Balkan countries towards local ownership in the regional cooperation process, with the aim of eventual EU integration.

In addition, market integration, free trade agreements and the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) have accelerated cooperation and increased the volume of trade between these countries by eliminating tariffs and non-tariff barriers. Furthermore, the Regional Economic Area (REA), developed in the Berlin Process framework, supported the connecting of the economies of the Western Balkans within the region and with the EU. Furthermore, I will analyse in detail the current Common Regional Market (CRM) as one of the mechanisms of EU support for deepening regional economic integration and building on EU rules and standards, and thereby bringing the region and its businesses closer to the EU Internal Market.

Finally, I will explain the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) as the institution providing the framework for the preparation of the Action Plan for implementing the Common Regional Market in the WB.

## European Union and the Western Balkans

In his declaration of 9 May 1950, Robert Schuman proposed creating a common market in two crucial sectors: the European Coal and Steel Community (ECS) 1951, followed by the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC) 1957. Following the signing of the Single European Act in 1987, the twelve member states<sup>1</sup> of the European Economic Community (EEC) completed the internal market on 31 December 1992. One year before in Maastricht, they had decided to develop the single market with economic and monetary union, a judicial and home affairs policy, and a common foreign policy, transforming the European Economic Community into a European Union (EU) (Moussis, 2005). Furthermore, Jean Monnet and other European countries' leaders promoted European Unity based on economic integration, peace, cooperation and solidarity between the member countries.

Following the fall of communism and central planning and the onset of the long transition process towards a democratic market system, the Western Balkan countries have been considered for the EU integration process and the eventual accession. The EU's peaceful integration process had progressed smoothly until 1995 when the accession of an increasing number of states with different historical backgrounds, cultures, languages, economic conditions and political traditions increased the need for political cohesion and decision-making process in the enlarged EU (Devuyt, 2006). Furthermore, in order to join the European Union, the applicant countries needed to fulfill the criteria set by the Copenhagen European Council in 1993 according to which prospective members had to be a stable democracy, have a functioning market economy and adopt the common rules, standards, and policies that make up the body of EU law, the *acquis communautaire*, known as conditions for EU membership (Baun, 2000).

After the successful enlargement of the EU with Central and East European Countries in 2004 and 2007, and later with Croatia in 2013, it was clear for most Western Balkan (WB) countries that joining the European integration process was the best alternative for them – politically, institutionally, and economically. The last country embarking on the European Integration process has been Kosovo, later than others because of the issues related to her final status and other political challenges she is currently facing.

<sup>1</sup> Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, Luxemburg, Netherlands, Denmark, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Ireland and UK.

For most countries, the EU introduced different instruments to support their efforts towards economic transition or reconstruction and economic, political and social reforms, although many countries faced double challenge fulfilling the EU standards due to their limited administrative capabilities and financial limitations. The integration of the Western Balkan countries has been on the EU agenda since the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, in which the European perspective for the Western Balkans was reconfirmed (Richet, 2019). However, for the candidate countries and potential candidates to meet the requirements of membership, they are required to strongly focus on fundamental reforms of the rule of law, the economy and the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration, even though many of the Western Balkan countries had made limited progress in these areas (European Commission, 2020a).

Among the essential activities within the EU agenda for the Western Balkans, economic integration (including market integration and integration of economic policies) is a crucial process that ensures economic sustainability, and convergence. Market integration is the basic step for economic integration that consists of eliminating barriers in trade between countries, while integration of economic policies includes the coordination and harmonization of economic policies with the EU countries. The European Union also initiated the European Partnership Action Plan for the Western Balkans, which served as a framework for planning the future assistance for these countries. Furthermore, among different EU financial instruments, the EU launched the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) for the Western Balkan countries in three rounds: IPA I 2007–2013, IPA II 2014–2020 and IPA III 2021–2027. IPAS main aim was to support countries to undertake the necessary reforms towards EU accession, prepare countries for competition within the EU and decrease the economic and social differences between different Western Balkan countries and regions. In 2020, the European Commission adopted the Communication *Enhancing the Accession Process*, which the Council endorsed in and sets out concrete proposals for strengthening the accession process for these countries (European Commission, 2020b).

### ***Stabilization and Association and the Enlargement Process in the Western Balkans***

The main instrument introduced by the European Union in support of the Western Balkan countries is Stabilisation and Association Process

(SAP). Stabilization and Association Process for the Western Balkans was launched in 1990 in support of institutional and administrative reforms in line with European Policies and practices. The core components of SAP are:

- Trade issues;
- Financial assistance;
- Stabilization and Association Agreement;
- Political and economic negotiations;
- Conditionality;
- Annual Supervision Report;
- European Partnership Action Plan – European Reform Agenda.

Among the main objective of the EU was to accelerate and promote the EU integration process in WB countries through stabilization and reconciliation policies.

North Macedonia was the first country in the region to sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) in 2001, entering into force in April 2004. For Albania, the EU liberalized most of its trade in 1999 under the framework of Autonomous Trade Preferences, with the SAAS entering into force in 2009. Montenegro signed the SAA and the Provisional Agreement on Trade and Trade-Related matters on 15 October 2007 with the SAA entering into force on 1 May 2010. Due to her specific political conditions and complications, Bosnia and Herzegovina launched SAA later than other countries on 1 June 2015. An integral part of the SAP was the Interim Trade Agreement that had entered into force on 1 July 2008. The SAA with Serbia entered into force in 2013 but before this a Provisional Association Agreement on Trade-Related issues had been reached between the EU and Serbia. Kosovo was the last country in the Western Balkans to go through the SAA process.

During November 2002, a Stabilization and Association Tracking Mechanism had been launched for Kosovo (taking into consideration Kosovo's unresolved final status) and paved the way for the Stabilization and Association Agreement between the EU and Kosovo entering into force in 2016.

Table 1.1 summarises the timeline of various stages of the SAA process in different WB countries. Analyzing this process, it is evident that the Western Balkan countries are at different stages of the European integration process although all of these countries regard EU member-

TABLE 1.1 Timetable of the EU Integration and Accession Processes of Western Balkans

Item	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Negotiations under SAA	31/01/2003	25/11/2005	28/10/2013	10/10/2005	05/04/2000	10/10/2005
SAA signed	12/06/2006	16/08/2008	27/10/2015	15/10/2007	09/04/2001	29/04/2008
SAA enters into force	01/04/2009	01/06/2015	01/04/2016	01/05/2010	01/04/2004	01/09/2013
Visa Liberalization into force	15/12/2010	15/02/2010		19/12/2009	19/12/2009	19/12/2009
Applied for EU Membership	24/04/2009	15/02/2016		15/12/2008	22/03/2004	22/12/2009
Council invited Commission's Opinion	16/11/2009	20/09/2016		23/4/2009	17/05/2004	25/10/2010
Reply to Commission questionnaire	13/04/2010			9/12/2009	14/02/2005	31/1/2011
Commission delivers opinion	09/11/2010			9/11/2010	09/11/2005	12/10/2011
Candidate status (EC)	27/06/2014			17/12/2010	17/12/2005	01/3/2012
Agreement to start accession negotiation	25/3/2020			26/6/2012	25/3/2020	28/06/2013
Accession negotiations started				29/6/2012		21/01/2014
Start of screening process (EC)				26/3/2012		25/07/2013
End of screening process (EC)				27/06/2013		24/03/2015
Opened the 1st Chapter (EC)				18/12/2012		14/12/2015
Opening Chapters 23 and 24				18/12/2013		18/07/2016
Closure of Chapters 23 and 24						
EU Membership						

NOTES Adapted from Regional Cooperation Council (2020a).

ship as their primary political and development objective. Apart from the Stabilization and Association Process, the EU has supported the Western Balkans with many instruments and agreements for the institutional promotion of these countries. This comprehensive support provides a framework for political dialogue and covers cooperation in various sectors, including justice and home affairs, trade, education, employment, energy, environment, and a range of other policy areas (European Commission, 2020b). Grabbe (2001) pointed out that the EU accession process is based on the previous models of the enlargement rather than the transition countries' specific needs. Comparing different enlargement models, there is evidence that during the Eastern enlargement, the EU applied several instruments to promote domestic changes but, as proved to be the case, the most effective tool was conditionality (Kathuria, 2018). The European Union continues to expand efforts to find the right balance between strict conditionality and the need to support stability in the Western Balkans by maintaining the momentum of the EU approximation process (Levitin & Sanfey, 2018). Furthermore, as Rupnik (2010) has pointed, to complete the Balkan region's accession process, the europragmatism will be essential to resolve the bilateral disputes between countries; therefore, the EU should rethink the concept of enlargement by strengthening the regional approach and increase the capacity of political elites.

### **Regional Cooperation and the Western Balkans**

According to the EU, regional cooperation is considered an emergent and crucial issue for the Western Balkan countries as the region has experienced political, economic, and institutional upheavals. Therefore, reconciliation between the countries of the region is of higher importance than in other regions. The first initiative for cooperation was undertaken in 1999 in the form of the Stability Pact for South East Europe to improve the relations between Western Balkan countries, bringing the region closer to the EU (*Zagreb Declaration*, 2007). According to Doring et al. (2010), initially, the European Union accession strategy for the Balkans was one linked accession to the peace and reforms in individual countries, but gradually this strategy shifted toward conditionality, requiring countries to meet EU criteria and conditions and to increase regional stability in the Western Balkans through regional cooperation. Furthermore, Oli Rehn pointed out that regional agreements and initiatives testify that the agenda of the regional cooperation

(mechanisms such as CEFTA, the Energy Community Treaty, the European Common Aviation Area Agreement as well as transport, energy, and environment infrastructure projects and cooperation in the area of justice, freedom and society) and European integration are increasingly intertwined (*Zagreb Declaration, 2007*). The EU's focus on promoting regional cooperation in the Western Balkans could be considered a priority, compared to other regions, as political challenges dominate the situation in the Western Balkans. Consequently, WB countries have engaged in regional cooperation and benefited economically and institutionally from the European integration process, promoting local institutions and their administrative capabilities. In addition, with the support of the EU, the relations between most countries continue to develop in the spirit of good neighbourly relations, contributing to the region's stability and its ability to use the opportunities coming from the EU and the global economy.

The main developments in regional cooperation in the Western Balkans from 1999 until 2020 are:

- Stability Pact for South East Europe;
- Negotiation and implementation of CEFTA 2006;
- Regional ownership-transformation of the Stability Pact to Regional Cooperation Council;
- Regional Cooperation Council;
- Berlin Process;
- Regional Economic Area of the Western Balkans;
- Common Regional Market of the Western Balkans.

### ***Stability Pact for South East Europe***

In 1999, the German Presidency of the European Union proposed a Stability Pact for South East Europe. As a result, the Stability Pact for South East Europe facilitated this process, therefore the region has made significant progress by establishing democratic institutions, civil society, and economic development while regional cooperation is becoming stronger (*Zagreb Declaration, 2007*). Stability Pact for the South East Europe was the first initiative undertaken by the EU after the crises in the Western Balkans in order to restart the regional cooperation, to overcome the challenges in the region in the short run, and support these countries in the EU integration process.

The Stability Pact for South East Europe as a framework for cooperation has acted as a catalyst for numerous positive developments in the region as peacebuilding required a comprehensive multilateral approach that addresses three key sectors such as secure environment, sustainable democratic system, and economic and social well-being (Hombach, 2006). Within the Stability Pact framework, many challenges of the region were addressed and good neighborly relations were initiated to bring stability, security, democracy, and economic prosperity (Qorraj, 2010).

Besides, the Working Tables of the Stability Pact have been actively involved in three core areas. Working Table I ensured parliamentary cooperation and human capital; Working Table II intensified the countries' economic cooperation such as free trade, investments, business activities, and other economic issues; Working Table III supported anti-corruption initiatives, defence and security issues.

### *Regional Ownership Process*

Regional ownership was the transfer of institutions involved in regional cooperation from the EU to the Western Balkan region. In 2008, the EU transferred the location of the Stability Pact for SEE from Brussels to the newly formed Regional Cooperation Council in Sarajevo. In addition, the leadership of this mechanism was also 'regionalized' with the leadership coming from the region. The idea of regional ownership in the framework of regional cooperation was launched under the assumption that satisfactory regional cooperation has been achieved and countries should have ownership of the process and play an active role in regional cooperation (Qorraj, 2018).

Although many attempts and instruments have been used to intensify regional cooperation, the core question remains whether regional ownership could encourage, and result in, significant cooperation efforts in the region, given the challenging issues and unresolved political problems between countries. These obstacles became apparent during the implementation of CEFTA 2006, when the countries of the region could not overcome trade and political disputes without EU intervention (Qorraj, 2018).

### *Regional Cooperation Council*

The Regional Cooperation Council, as a successor to the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe, continued in 2008 as the main regional insti-



tution in the region, specifically supporting regional cooperation between countries and encouraging the regional ownership process.

Promoting and enhancing cooperation in the priority areas, namely, economic and social development, infrastructure and energy, justice and home affairs, security cooperation, building human capital and cross-cutting issues, and parliamentary cooperation, the Regional Cooperation Council also supported the European and Euro-Atlantic integration. It created a political climate to carrying out projects of a broader, regional character to each member's benefit. The Western Balkan region is committed to European integration based on EU rules and principles and ultimately membership in the European Union (EU), and to regional and European initiatives such as the Regional Economic Area (REA) established as part of the Berlin Process, the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), the Treaty Establishing the Transport Community, and the Treaty Establishing the Energy Community (Atlantic Council, 2020).

The Regional Cooperation Council played a unique role in providing a framework for progress and preparing the action plans for regional initiatives. The European Union and other international partners supported the Regional Cooperation Council in developing an appropriate monitoring tool to track the implementation of measures agreed in regional economic initiatives and focusing on Regional Common Market 2021–2024. In close cooperation with international organizations, EU and regional organizations, Regional Cooperation Council will support the post-2020 strategy concerning Western Balkans' regional cooperation. According to the Regional Cooperation Council (2020a), other relevant organizations focused on the Western Balkans are:

1. Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)
2. Center of Excellence in Finance (CEF)
3. Education Reform Initiative for South Eastern Europe (ERISEE)
4. Energy Community (EC)
5. European Training Foundation (ETF)
6. Global Water Partnership (GWP)
7. Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe (NALAS)
8. Regional Anti-corruption Initiative (RAI)
9. Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA)

10. Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)
11. Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group in South Eastern Europe (SWG)
12. South Eastern and Eastern Europe for Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC)
13. South-Eastern Europe Health Network (SEEHN)
14. Transport Community (TC)
15. Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum (WB6 CIF)
16. Civil Aviation Agency (CAA)

### *Regional Economic Area*

Regional Economic Area (REA), implemented in 2017, was established as part of the Berlin Process, with support of the European Union in order to promote regional cooperation between Western Balkan countries as a regional initiative and consisted mainly of four components:

- A common market for goods, services, and capital;
- Free flow of skilled workforce integrated into professional and academic EU networks;
- A common digital market;
- A dynamic investment space.

The Multi-Annual Plan of Regional Economic Area (MAP REA) was supported by the Regional Cooperation Council, the CEFTA Secretariat, the European Union, and Regional Economic Area coordinators of Western Balkan countries. The support from the European Union was the factor of success for delivering the commitments within MAP REA. On the other hand, existing political sensitivities have affected the implementation in some areas and hampered the progress in obtaining concrete results. Despite challenges and difficulties, it has been also proven that the experience of the implementation of the MAP REA served as a useful tool for planning the future processes related to the enhanced REA 2021–2024 (Hanzl-Weiss et al., 2020).

According to the study by Hanzl-Weiss et al. (2020), the implementation of MAP REA during 2017 encountered several challenges and risks related, but not limited, to the nature and technical feasibility of the measures, the capacity of public administration to comply with the manifold and the very demanding agendas. In addition, poor coordi-

nation amongst relevant institutions at the level of each WB economy and regional level, and the lack of dedicated technical assistance and financial instruments to support the implementation of certain parts of measures. Relying on lessons learned could, in turn, help facilitate the process of internal coordination, planning, and subsequent implementation of the measures within the framework of future REA 2021–2024.

Furthermore, in this connection, the cross-sectoral nature of MAP REA posed a significant challenges to coordination as it necessitated stronger coordination of line ministries, agencies, and other relevant stakeholders at the level of each individual economy and at the regional and international levels.

### *Common Regional Market*

The Common Regional Market (CRM) of WB6 was negotiated during 2020 and signed during the Sofia Summit on 10 November 2020, covering the period 2021–2024. The Action Plan for a Regional Market (RM) should be implemented by the end of 2024 and will include: free movement of goods, services, capital and people; regional investment area; regional digital area; and regional industrial and innovation area. According to the Regional Cooperation Council (2020b) the Western Balkans Leaders Declaration on Common Regional Market, 2020, four key areas of the CRM were highlighted:

- regional trade area: including free movement of goods, services, capital and people, and cross-cutting measures such as the Green Lanes, to align with EU-compliant rules and standards and provide opportunities for companies and citizens;
- regional investment area, to align investment policies with the EU standards and best international practices and promote the region to foreign investors;
- regional digital area, to integrate the Western Balkans into the pan-European digital market; and
- regional industrial and innovation area, to transform the industrial sectors, shape value chains they belong to, and prepare them for today's realities and challenges of tomorrow.

Among the critical issues for the CRM is the implementation of the Action Plan for 2021–2024 by the WB countries and the need for better

TABLE 1.2 The Common Regional Market Action Plan 2021–2024

Connecting economies	Goods	Services	Capital	People
Maintain the green corridors and streamline BCPS/CCPS controls; Elimination of non-tariff barriers (NTBS); Trade related aspects; Public private partnership; Reduction of trade costs and transparency.	Mutual recognition programmes (MRPS); Risk management; System of electronic exchange of data SEED+; Harmonization and cooperation with the EU.	Additional protocol 6 (AP6) on trade in services; Tourism; Financial services; Postal services; Professional qualifications; Enabling environment; Electronic commerce.	Development of a modern payment system Strengthening regional cooperation and coordination on COVID-19 response as part of relief, recovery and resilience.	Mobility of students, researchers and professors Mobility of individuals on the basis of IDS Portability of social rights and removal of working permits.
Regional investment area	Regional digital area		Regional industrial and innovation area	
Regional investment promotion; Regional investment policy reforms; Regional investment retention and expansion.	Digital infrastructure and connectivity; Digital skills and competence; Digital economy in the era of new ICT technologies; Trust and security.		Regional innovation; Regional industry development; Automotive industry value chains; Green & circular economy value chains; Sustainable tourism.	

NOTES Adapted from Regional Cooperation Council (2020c).

coordination and harmonization of the activities needed for the effective impact on the economic convergence of these countries. Regional Cooperation Council and CEFTA will be leading regional organizations to support WB6 to implement it, jointly with regional and international partners. Furthermore, the Western Balkan countries appointed the national contact points to implement the action plan activities. The European Commission has indicated that the Western Balkans would be closer to the EU single market by increasing regional economic cooperation and trade. Therefore the Common Regional Market Action Plan is an integral part of the region's EU accession process (Regional Cooperation Council, 2020c). Table 1.2 elaborates different elements of the

Regional Common Market, that is, the WB6 Regional Economic Integration Plan according to the Action Plan for the period 2021–2024.

Compared to Regional Economic Area and considering the current situation during 2020, the Common Regional Market is supporting some additional components such as:

- Green Agenda as a tool for a comprehensive transformation of the region;
- Regional Agreement for Free Movement with ID Cards;
- Extension of WB6 Green corridors to the EU corridors;
- Digital Transformation;
- Youth and youth-related policies for young people;
- Think Tank and civil society activities;
- Research, Innovation, Education and Science.

The components mentioned above will support the Western Balkans' European perspective to fulfill the EU rules and standards, therefore, supporting their businesses towards the EU internal market and promoting the Balkans as an attractive region for investments and economic activity.

## Conclusions

As the EU integration is a dynamic process that involves the reallocation of economic and political power between the member states and the Union, the coordination of the EU policies is challenging issue. Although the European Union is the most significant contributor to the Western Balkans institutionally, politically, and economically, the previous enlargement experience has shown that the European integration does not guarantee sustainable economic development but provides a robust framework for reforms in countries such as WB6. Therefore, the EU and countries of the region should focus on economic sustainability rather than political issues to create economic convergence in order to be able to compete and use the opportunities coming from EU membership.

In 1943 Jean Monnet declared that there will be no peace in Europe if the states are reconstituted based on national sovereignty, as the countries of Europe are too small to guarantee their people the necessary prosperity and social development (Brinkley & Hackett, 1991). This must be a lesson for the countries of the Western Balkans: although the

process will be long and challenging, EU integration is the best framework for cooperation between peoples and countries.

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