



# Through the Labyrinth of Regional Cooperation:

*How to Make Sense of  
Regional Integration in  
the Western Balkans*



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# Abstract

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In the absence of a breakthrough in the EU integration of the Western Balkan six, the EU has been innovative in finding ways to keep the countries of the region interested in pursuing reforms. These include strengthening regional integration via the Berlin Process. Meanwhile some Western Balkan countries have initiated a parallel regional integration process called Open Balkan. This policy brief analyses the scope, depth and limitations of regional integration in the Western Balkans, and considers whether it actually delivers the desired results or is rather a distraction from EU integration.

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# 01. Introduction

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Winston Churchill is said to have quipped that the Balkans produce more history than they can consume. However, these days, it seems that the Western Balkans might produce more regional cooperation than they can consume. Buzzwords such as Mini-Schengen, Open Balkan, Berlin Process, abbreviations from CEFTA to RYCO constitute a confusing mix of integration and cooperation for the countries of the Western Balkans. These efforts began well before EU integration was on the agenda, but remain a potentially important supplement to it, rather than a replacement for EU integration. This brief will look at the potential and limitations of regional integration and how to streamline the two main initiatives, the Berlin Process and the Open Balkan initiative.

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While there has been some progress with the main political project in the Western Balkans—EU membership – in recent months it remains stuck. Candidate status for Bosnia and Herzegovina came reluctantly as an afterthought to granting the status to Ukraine and Moldova. Those negotiating, Serbia and Montenegro, are not advancing and Albania and North Macedonia still face challenges in catching up. Citizens of the region share this feeling: the number of respondents who expect swift EU integration is at an all-time low (22% expect integration by 2025, 37% by 2030, while 28% don't believe their country will ever become part of the Union).<sup>1</sup>

Now aware of the potential security and energy threats arising from neglecting the Western Balkans, the EU unveiled a 1 billion Euro support package to help the region address the immediate consequences of the energy crisis in November 2022. This is part of the EU Economic and Investment Plan for the region aiming at mobilizing up to 9 billion Euro from the Instrument of Pre-Accession

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<sup>1</sup> RCC, *Balkan Barometer 2022*, <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/home>

Assistance III (IPA) package for the period 2021-2027, and attracting additional investments worth EUR 20 billion from the European development banks and other international financial institutions.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the EU has been innovative in finding ways to keep the countries of the region interested in pursuing reforms in the absence of actual enlargement. These include strengthening regional integration, in particular through two parallel processes, the Berlin Process initiated by German chancellor Merkel in 2014, and Open Balkan<sup>3</sup> a regional initiative of Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia to deepening economic cooperation. Yet, it remains unclear whether these initiatives really deliver or whether they are a distraction from EU integration.

## o2. The Potential and Limits of Regional Cooperation

The EU's support for regional cooperation and (intra)regional economic integration in the Western Balkans is long-standing, having emerged in response to the Yugoslav wars in the second half of the 1990s. Moreover, since the launch of the Stabilisation and Association Process in 1999, regional cooperation has become a central part of EU accession conditionality, in addition to the Copenhagen accession criteria formulated in 1993.

This EU "two-track strategy" towards the Western Balkans meant combining EU bilateral relations and enlargement conditionality for individual candidate (and potential candidate) countries, with the promotion of EU standards through EU-sponsored parallel structures and multilateral intra-regional initiatives. The basic idea was that these two processes of EU and intra-regional integration could be mutually reinforcing, since regional integration among Western Balkan countries would prepare them for smoother integration with the EU in the future, also strengthening EU conditionality in a region characterised by continuous political and economic instability. In addition, regional economic cooperation was supposed to improve bilateral relations in the region.

Regional cooperation initiatives have undoubtedly had a positive impact on the

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<sup>2</sup> Bartlett, Will, Bonomi, Matteo and Uvalic, Milica. "Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans: Assessing the possible economic, social and environmental impact of the proposed flagship projects". Study requested by the AFET committee, European Parliament, May 2022. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO\\_STU\(2022\)702561](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2022)702561)

<sup>3</sup> This brief will call the initiative Open Balkan, as it is described by its founders, even if in English, the correct word is Balkans.

Western Balkans. This was evident especially during the first decade of the 2000s, when integration with the EU proceeded at a slow pace. At that time, regional cooperation proved to be pivotal in advancing the EU agenda for the region in a number of fields, from trade liberalisation and market opening (through the 2006 Central European Free Trade Agreement – CEFTA) to police cooperation and visa liberalisation, promoting stability and economic growth. A number of studies have identified a clear positive impact of CEFTA in particular on regional trade integration.<sup>4</sup> In the period up to mid-2019, CEFTA increased intra-regional trade by around one third, and the positive impact rises to around 70% if Serbia is excluded from the results.<sup>5</sup>

From mid-2014, under the intergovernmental auspices of the Berlin Process the EU tried to re-engage the region, based on further advancements of regional integration in the Western Balkans. Accordingly, Western Balkan leaders agreed on two important projects for regional economic integration: the Multi-annual Action Plan on Regional Economic Area 2017– 2019 (REA) and the Common Regional Market 2020–2024 (CRM).

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## These ambitious new plans for regional economic integration had a medium-term objective that could have helped foster the enlargement agenda in the Western Balkans on the basis of the EU's four market freedoms.

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These ambitious new plans for regional economic integration had a medium-term objective that could have helped foster the enlargement agenda in the Western Balkans on the basis of the EU's four market freedoms. This would have fostered their alignment with the EU acquis, built trust amongst themselves and, ultimately, engender local ownership and responsibility. Other positive economic spillovers were hoped for, such as improved external competitiveness and higher exports to reduce the region's chronic external imbalances.

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4 Borko Handjiski et al. *Enhancing Regional Trade Integration in Southeast Europe*. World Bank Working Paper, 185, 2010; <https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/abs/10.1596/978-0-8213-8259-2>

5 Richard Grieveson, Mario Holzner, Goran Vukšić. *Regional Economic Cooperation in the Western Balkans: The Role of Stabilization and Association Agreements, Bilateral Investment Treaties and Free Trade Agreements in Regional Investment and Trade Flows*, WIIW, 2020, <https://wiiw.ac.at/regional-economic-cooperation-in-the-western-balkans-the-role-of-stabilisation-and-association-agreements-bilateral-investment-treaties-and-free-trade-agreements-in-regional-investment-and-trade-flows-p-5362.html>

Yet, notwithstanding some progress, such as the regional roaming agreement, the negotiation of CEFTA's Additional Protocol 6 (a framework agreement extending the principle of free trade to the service sector), or the facilitation of border-crossing procedures for goods during the pandemic (thanks to "Green Corridors"), the results of regional economic integration among the Western Balkans have remained modest and uneven. Overall, there is a consensus that the cooperation often rarely moved beyond the declarative, as there is a lack of commitment and political will, together with unresolved bilateral disputes, that have not made the REA/CRM fully applicable in practice.

The achievement of truly deeper regional economic integration in the Western Balkans would further increase the level of economic development.<sup>6</sup> Making it easier to move goods, capital and people around the region would boost the economy. However, even in the case of a fully functioning single market in the region—quite a big assumption—the upside is likely to be quite limited. This is mostly because the regional market is very small, with the combined GDP of the six Western Balkan economies roughly equivalent to that of Slovakia. This indicates why even when regional trade initiatives have been successful, such as in the case of CEFTA, this has failed to deliver a significant boost to overall economic growth momentum.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, intra-regional trade in goods in the Western Balkans tends to be of a low sophistication. Upgrading quality of production, which is associated with a generally higher economic development and better living standards, is unlikely to be significantly stimulated by a deeper regional market alone. Meanwhile another goal of deeper regional integration—to create a bigger market that is more attractive for foreign investors—is also unlikely to produce big results. The region undoubtedly has significant potential to attract increased FDI inflows, not least due to potential near-shoring in the wake of the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, foreign investors' interest in the Western Balkans is chiefly as a location for production which is then exported to the EU market, meaning that EU integration, rather than regional integration, is likely to be the key driver of greater and higher-quality FDI inflows in the future. Moreover, the idea of the six countries genuinely cooperating to attract joint investments seems quite fanciful. Even the Visegrad countries—which for almost two decades have been in the EU single market and do not have tensions between them

6 Plamen Kaloyanchev, Ivan Kusen, Alexandros Mouzakitidis, *Untapped Potential: Intra-Regional Trade in the Western Balkans*. *European Economy, Discussion Paper 80*, 2018, European Commission, [https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/publications/untapped-potential-intra-regional-trade-western-balkans\\_en](https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/publications/untapped-potential-intra-regional-trade-western-balkans_en)

7 Bertelsmann Foundation and WIIW, 'Pushing on a String? An evaluation of regional economic cooperation in the WesternBalkans', 2020, [https://www.bertelsmannstiftung.de/fileadmin/files/user\\_upload/Pushing\\_on\\_a\\_string.pdf](https://www.bertelsmannstiftung.de/fileadmin/files/user_upload/Pushing_on_a_string.pdf)

that are comparable with some bilateral relationships in the Western Balkans—compete continuously with each other to attract FDI projects.

As a result, regional economic integration in the Western Balkans alone simply does not have sufficient weight and attractiveness. It does not represent a game changer for economic growth and development of the region and, thus, it hardly justifies the realisation of a fully-fledged internal regional market. In addition to its small market size, aspirations for a common regional market will also be hampered by weak institutions, outstanding territorial and constitutional disputes, and a lack of trust between some partners. It is also notable that in the case of the Visegrad countries, the true deepening of regional integration happened only after they joined the EU in 2004. In the case of the Western Balkans, the region is therefore being asked to achieve something before accession that EU-CEE countries only managed afterwards.

## o3. Berlin Process Reloaded

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Over the past eight years, the Berlin Process has been the main driver of regional cooperation, often with a strong focus on infrastructure. It was launched in 2014, on the initiative of former German Chancellor Angela Merkel and was soon joined by Austria, France, Italy, the UK, Poland and other countries. Annual summits intensified the interaction between the EU and the Western Balkans and succeeded in keeping the Western Balkans 6 on the agenda of EU-states and institutions. Over the years, a number of important agreements were concluded in the framework of the process.<sup>8</sup> However, in recent years, the process has run out of steam.

The 'relaunch' of the process has been one of the priorities of the new German government for the Western Balkans and Berlin hosted the summit once more in early November 2022. Topics that had been incrementally dominating with each Western Balkan Summit have all found their place in the reintroduced Berlin process. Therefore, the connectivity agenda, energy (including energy security) and the Green Agenda, amongst others, were some of the main topics of discussion in Berlin. The highlight of the Summit was the signing of the three important agreements related to the implementation of the Common Regional Market: 1) the Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the Western Balkans; 2) Agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Doctors of Medicine, Dentists and Architects based on EU rules; and

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8 Marina Vulović, *The Berlin Process in the Western Balkans: Big Ideas, Difficult Implementation*, SWP Comment, 21.12.2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/the-berlin-process-in-the-western-balkans-big-ideas-difficult-implementation>



3) the Agreement on Freedom of Movement with ID Cards in the Western Balkans.<sup>9</sup> Efforts now are directed toward the ratification of these agreements and smooth implementation by the Western Balkan countries.

Although very important in the context of the current energy crisis, the adoption of the Joint Declaration on Energy Security and Green Transition in the Western Balkans<sup>10</sup> passed almost unnoticed. This document was strongly supported by all non-WB actors, especially Germany which has committed to expanding the Climate Partnership with all Western Balkan countries, not just with Serbia, as is now the case. By doing so, the German Government committed to intensifying political dialogue including technical and financial cooperation related to the Green Agenda.

The Annex to the Declaration further outlines the specific commitments made by various actors. The European Commission committed to establishing the Joint Purchase Platform under REPowerEU which will be inclusive of the countries of the Western Balkans partners in order to have access to more competitive prices and in effect, to decrease the dependency on Russian gas. In addition to these efforts, the assistance of Germany for clean energy projects in the Western Balkans stands out, with an overall portfolio of 2,2 billion euros provided by the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development through the German Development Bank KfW.<sup>11</sup> And finally, pending approval by the German Bundestag, Germany committed budgetary support of up to 500 million euros (equivalent to the assistance offered by the European Commission) to overcome the immediate needs of these countries in regard to fiscal pressure arising from the impact of the energy crisis.<sup>12</sup>

## o4. Open Balkan – A Mystery Box?

Whereas the Berlin Process has enjoyed undivided support in the Western Balkans—the main critics were some EU member states that were not initially invited—the main home-grown regional cooperation initiative, Open Balkan, has been politically polarising within the region. It started as “Mini-Schengen” and became officially baptised Open Balkan. Depending on whom you ask, it is re-

9 Chair’s conclusions 2022, 3.11.2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/western-balkans-summit-2140518>

10 Declaration on energy security and green transition in the Western Balkans, *ibid.*

11 Annex to the Declaration on energy security and green transition in the Western Balkans, *ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

garded either as unwise and dangerous,<sup>13</sup> or as misunderstood and beneficial.<sup>14</sup> Despite criticisms, the architects of Open Balkan from Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia have staunchly stuck to their message of how their project would create a tide that would lift all boats in the region. Moreover, they have been emphasizing the local character of this initiative as “an internal desire, not patronized externally” (Edi Rama) and, as such, coming “the people from the Balkans, those who understand that they need to connect and solve problems on their own” (Aleksandar Vučić).<sup>15</sup> This regional ownership is now promoted as the key factor that would translate the economic benefits of Open Balkan into much needed (sustainable) regional cooperation based on sincere political partnership between regional political elites, and social trust among peoples of the Western Balkans. Similarly, this ownership transfer to the local countries is seen – by Washington and Brussels, predominantly – as a proof, as stated by Commissioner Várhelyi, that political leadership of the Western Balkan countries has matured and is genuine in its readiness to put the past behind and start working together towards future.<sup>16</sup> Yet, the future promised by Open Balkan is but wishful thinking, as the initiative still looks like a pet-project of current state leaders, not as a shared strategic goal that includes all countries and societies at large.

While Open Balkan aims to replicate the Schengen Zone’s free flow of capital, products, services, and labour, it has no ambitions in substituting the Berlin Process; instead, its declarative goal is to complement it by creating cooperation and synergy that would best prepare participating states for EU membership. Besides this component there seems to be no significant added value of Open Balkan to existing initiatives in the region. However, whereas the ambition of creating a common regional market modeled on the EU’s single market is somewhat clear, the political narrative and justifications underpinning it can be best described as a ‘mystery box’ – a plot device which uses an object or idea to grab the audience’s attention by withholding information about its contents. And indeed, the cost-benefit analysis of Open Balkan prepared by Montenegro’s Ministry for European Affairs clearly indicates that the necessary information on the initiative cannot be found (in a single place) and that its dubious content is usually formulated during non-transparent meetings of regional leaders at high-level summits. Namely, the analysis deems Open Balkan to be in an exper-

13 Edward P. Joseph, *Open Balkan(s) is Not Just Unwise. It’s Dangerous*, *Balkan Insight*, 15.6.2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/15/open-balkans-is-not-just-unwise-its-dangerous/>

14 *The future belongs to the peoples of the Balkans*, *IFIMES*, 6.7.2022, <https://www.ifimes.org/en/researches/2022-open-balkan-the-future-belongs-to-the-peoples-of-the-balkans/5060>

15 *Ohrid Agreement: Open borders, labor and student exchange, travel with ID cards only*, *B92*, 10.11.2019, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2019&mm=11&dd=10&nav\\_id=107497](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2019&mm=11&dd=10&nav_id=107497); “Unstoppable” *Open Balkan initiative promises “great steps” for region, say leaders*, *Anadolu Agency*, 8.6.2022 <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/unstoppable-open-balkan-initiative-promises-great-steps-for-region-say-leaders/2609089>

16 *Statement of Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi at the official opening of the Open Balkan Summit in Belgrade*, 2.9.2022, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/varhelyi/announcements/statement-commissioner-oliver-varhelyi-official-opening-open-balkan-summit-belgrade\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/varhelyi/announcements/statement-commissioner-oliver-varhelyi-official-opening-open-balkan-summit-belgrade_en)

imental phase as it lacks: (1) a strategic document and action plans, (2) the legal framework and mechanisms to implement it, and (3) methodology for measuring success and an administrative body that would carry out these evaluations and propose measures.<sup>17</sup> As such, Open Balkan is rather closed as to what it is. However, if Open Balkan goes beyond bilateral agreements (through which it is operating at the moment) and checks these boxes, then it would effectively become an initiative parallel to the Berlin Process.

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Just as with any other ‘mystery box’, the speculation of what Open Balkan might be is more compelling than what its founders envisaged it to be. After all, why should anyone trust local authoritarian leaders that have a track record of building their power through state capture, populism, and corruption? And, in the light of this fact, what can be gained from the vague and non-transparent initiative resting upon the ambitions of such architects? It can be argued that the very form of Open Balkan undermines the content it promises – namely, mutual trust and cooperation in the Western Balkans. As Serbia is seen to “undoubtedly gain the most in political terms”<sup>18</sup> from Open Balkan – most notably in the creation of a perception of normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Prishtina – then it comes as no surprise that Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina remain skeptical about jumping on the bandwagon led by the regional hegemon,<sup>19</sup> as Open Balkan may turn out to be a vehicle for the transmission of soft power known as the “Serb World” (Srpski svet). In its present form, Open Balkan promises a future of winners and losers among participating countries, and this is not a configuration in which free trade and job creation would lead to overcoming mistrust and eventually bringing prosperity to the region. Quite the opposite, it would fuel resentment and further destabilise the region. Nevertheless, even as a “political stunt” and “political theater”, Open Balkan is a clear message to the EU that the Western Balkans will look for alternative approaches if it continues to neglect its enlargement agenda in the region.

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17 Prednosti i mane učešća Crne Gore u regionalnoj inicijativi “Otvoreni Balkan”, Ministarstvo evropskih poslova, 25.11.2022, <https://www.gov.me/clanak/analiza-prednosti-i-mane-ucesca-crne-gore-u-regionalnoj-inicijativi-otvoreni-balkan>

18 Andrej Semenov, “Open Balkan: Objectives and Justifications”, *Comillas Journal of International Relations* 24, p. 29.

19 *Ibid.*

## o5. How to make sense of Regional Integration

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Regional integration is a central element of the Western Balkan EU accession process, and that will, and should, continue. However, putting too much emphasis on that alone, and investing a large amount of political capital with the promise of big returns, would be a mistake. Instead, the next step of regional economic integration should take place as part of a much bigger push towards deepening the economic integration of the Western Balkans with the EU.

Two other important considerations must be kept in mind. First, the additional economic carrots must be accompanied by a reinvigoration of the reform process that has faltered in parts of the region since 2008. As the experience of the 2004 EU joiners showed, it is the years leading up to EU accession where the real reform progress was made. If the EU can re-establish a credible accession perspective in the Western Balkans, similar improvements can be hoped for. This in itself would support regional integration; the weakness of institutions has been one of the main barriers to better regional economic cooperation. Second, greater economic integration cannot be a substitute for EU accession of Western Balkans' countries. Full membership must remain the unambiguous goal.

### I. Setting the priority of regional integration straight

Different and potentially competing processes of regional cooperation absorb considerable political and administrative resources, with modest returns and limited potential for future benefits. Thus, regional integration merits investments by respective governments and the EU, where the scale of the investment has to be carefully calibrated with the limited returns.

### II. Merge Open Balkan and the Berlin Process

There are many regional initiatives, including but not limited to Open Balkan and the Berlin Process. These should be streamlined into one structure of regional integration that also includes the EU and EU Member States and gives institutional force to the main regional body, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC).

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### III. Include the Western Balkans in the EU budget

The Western Balkans should be fully included in the EU budget, subject to the usual conditionality faced by existing Member States. Technical support should also be provided to maximise absorption capacity. This would finance important infrastructure upgrading and deliver a positive demand shock, as has been the case in EU-CEE. Even increased EU budget transfers from the current 1% of GDP per year to 2%—which is still well below what many EU-CEE countries get—would increase GDP in the Western Balkans by 14% (Jovanovic et. al. 2022).

### IV. Integrate the Western Balkans into the Single Market

The Western Balkans should be integrated further into the Single Market, via an expansion and deepening of the Stabilisation and Association Agreements. Here, the DCFTAs with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia can provide some guidance, but the EU can also be more imaginative in thinking about how to deepen integration. The increased pressure on domestic firms that this would initially cause would be partly offset by higher budget transfers and technical support.

If the EU can manage this—creating a positive jolt to the economic integration of the Western Balkans into the EU—it would deliver a much more positive push towards regional integration than the current plan alone. Connecting the two processes more strongly will significantly increase the political incentives for local actors to invest real political capital into regional cooperation for all six countries. And the Visegrad case suggests there would be an enormous post-accession upside for regional economic integration.

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## About us

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The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) is a joint initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and Centre for the Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz (CSEES) promoting the European integration of the Western Balkans and the consolidation of democratic, open countries in the region. BiEPAG is grounded in the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. It adheres to values that are common to a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail. It is composed of prominent policy researchers from the region and wider Europe with demonstrable comprehension of the Western Balkans and the processes shaping the region. Members are Florian Bieber (Coordinator), Bojan Baća, Matteo Bonomi, Dimitar Bechev, Srđan Cvijić, Marika Djolai, Milica Delević, Nikola Dimitrov, Vedran Džihić, Richard Grieveson, Donika Emini, Dejan Jović, Marko Kmezić (Assistant Coordinator), Srđan Majstorović, Jovana Marović, Zoran Nechev, Damir Kapidžić, Tena Prelec, Corina Stratulat, Nikolaos Tzifakis, Alida Vračić, Gjergji Vurmo, Natasha Wunsch.

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The European Fund for the Balkans is a joint initiative of the Erste Foundation, Robert Bosch Foundation and King Baudouin Foundation that envisions and facilitates initiatives strengthening democracy, fostering European integration and affirming the role of the Western Balkans in addressing Europe's challenges. Its strategy is focused on three overarching areas – fostering democratisation, enhancing regional cooperation and boosting EU Integration. The EFB supports the process of affirming the efficacy of EU enlargement policy across the Western Balkans, improving regional cooperation amongst civil society organisations based on solidarity and demand-driven dialogue. It provides means and platforms for informed and empowered citizens to take action demanding accountable institutions and democracy. The focus is on continuous reforms of the policies and practices of the Western Balkans countries on their way to EU accession.

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The Centre for Southeast European Studies was set up in November 2008 following the establishment of Southeast Europe as a strategic priority at the University of Graz in 2000. The Centre is an interdisciplinary and cross-faculty institution for research and education, with the goal to provide space for the rich teaching and research activities at the university on and with Southeast Europe and to promote interdisciplinary collaboration. The Centre also aims to provide information and documentation and to be a point of contact for media and public interested in Southeast Europe, in terms of political, legal, economic and cultural developments. An interdisciplinary team of lawyers, historians, and political scientists has contributed to research on Southeast Europe, through articles, monographs and other publications. The centre regularly organizes international conferences and workshops to promote cutting edge research on Southeast Europe.

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