



## Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans – is there a civil society pillar?

By Jelica Minić, Zoran Nechev and Ivan Nikolovski

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# Introduction

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An increasing number of EU officials and institutions is posing questions in regards to the effectiveness of regional organizations and initiatives in the Western Balkans. This comes in times when EU member states are engaging in something that might end in major overhaul of the accession process as we know it. And in this process, the segment of the Commission dealing with enlargement, under the new leadership of the Hungarian nominee Oliver Varhelyi, would need to answer

these questions. With such state of play, the authors of this paper engage in drafting a paper that would contribute to the overall debate by analysing the role of civil society in the expansion and consolidation of regional cooperation through inclusion in the work of regional organizations and initiatives. The paper goes into detail in mapping and elaborating the involvement of CSOs and their regional networks in the core work of these institutions.

# EU support in strengthening the role of civil society in the Western Balkans

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Regional cooperation in the area covering a great part of former Yugoslavia minus Slovenia and plus Albania was initiated by the European Union (EU) after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina ended. The EU Regional Approach was launched in 1996 for the five countries of the region at that time<sup>1</sup>. It was aiming to support the implementation of the Dayton/Paris and Erdut peace agreements and to create an area of political stability and economic prosperity through promotion and maintenance of democracy, rule of law, respect for human and minority rights by revitalising economic activity. This was the initial step in introducing a regional

component in the development of a new post-war architecture of the region where state and nation building was the main preoccupation.

Anti-war and women organizations in war torn societies established connections and common actions even during the war, extending their cross-country cooperation massively after peace was achieved.

The Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) and Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe were created simultaneously in 1999 when the Kosovo war was ended. These initiatives followed the same lines as the Regional Approach. Under the heading *Democratisation, Civil Society, and Institution-building* of the document launching the SAP<sup>2</sup> it was stated that the EU action would be focused, particularly in the regional context, on enhancing “the stability of political structures, the maintenance of rule of law, the effectiveness of public

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<sup>1</sup> Macedonia and Albania, which were not involved in the 1991-1995 war, had more advanced relations with the EU, and Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina were parties to the Dayton/Paris peace agreements and the development of their relations with the EU depended on their compliance with the agreements.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, *Commission proposes a Stabilisation and Association process for countries of South-Eastern Europe*, IP/99/350, Brussels, 26 May 1999 [https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-99-350\\_en.htm](https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-99-350_en.htm)

administration and the viability of civil society.” Since the launching of SAP, Western Balkan regional cooperation and civil society development became the inseparable essentials of recovery and stabilisation. Since then, the specific weight of civil society in the SAP, as well as in regional cooperation has steadily grown.

Today, civil society stands high in the EU accession process and the expanding regional cooperation. This is visible in the European Commission (EC) annual reports on Western Balkan countries where civil society is elaborated under a separate heading in the *Fundamentals first: political criteria and the rule of law* chapters, the part on functioning of democratic institutions and the Public Administration Reform. The range of assessment in establishing an enabling environment for the development and financing of civil society varies from no progress (Serbia and Albania) to

continued progress (North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Montenegro) and no strategic framework for cooperation with civil society with differences across levels of governments (BiH). However, in each report, some specific areas of successful or increased engagement of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) were registered: from human rights defenders’ activism, cooperation of the administration with civil society on EU accession affairs, monitoring reforms in different fields, increased cooperation at the local level, transparency of financing, some legal improvements.<sup>3</sup>

Since the year 2000, the EC has supported the civil society in the WB, dedicating EUR 33.5 million through the Civil Society Facility (CSF) programme aiming to “support CSOs networks to give citizens a voice and influence public sector reform processes through analysis, monitoring and advocacy.”<sup>4</sup> The thematic areas of this programme mostly ►

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<sup>3</sup> European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document Albania Report 2019; Commission Staff Working Document Bosnia and Herzegovina Analytical Report 2019; Commission Staff Working Document Kosovo\* Report 2019; Commission Staff Working Document Montenegro Report 2019; Commission Staff Working Document North Macedonia Report 2019; Commission Staff Working Document Serbia 2019, Brussels, 29.5.2019 [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/package\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/package_en)

<sup>4</sup> The Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia <https://europa.rs/eu-assistance-to-serbia/eu-and-serbia-15-years-of-partnership/civil-society/?lang=en>

► correspond to the enlargement strategy priorities like strengthening rule of law, public administration reform, regional cooperation, but also civic and capacity building initiatives, improving the position of vulnerable groups, and cultural diversity.

The CSF supports activities of existing and development of new regional CSO networks in different areas. The distribution of CSO networks addressing specific thematic areas is presented in the table below (table 1).

**Table 1.** Thematic areas in which regional networks work<sup>5</sup>

Thematic area	Number of networks	Percentage
Anti-corruption	1	2.63%
Civil society development	3	7.89%
Culture	2	5.26%
Democracy and governance	2	5.26%
Dialogue and reconciliation	2	5.26%
Environmental protection	4	10.53%
Gender equality and women's rights	2	5.26%
Human rights	4	10.53%
LGBTI	1	2.63%
Media	1	2.63%
Professional association	2	5.26%
Rule of law	2	5.26%
Rural development	3	7.89%
Social inclusion and social protection	5	13.16%
Social innovation	1	2.63%
Youth	1	2.63%
Other	2	5.26%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Source:** TACSO Report on Regional CSO Networks in the Western Balkans and Turkey (2016), Prepared by M. Smolaka Krajnović, p.19



It is worthwhile mentioning that this overview from 2016 does not cover the full range of CSOs' cooperation in the region and especially the recent phenomena – in particular the growing regional cooperation of think tanks<sup>6</sup> on policy issues relevant for reforms, regional cooperation, and the EU accession process in the Western Balkans; however, it provides a glimpse of the thematic areas of regional CSO networks and their intensity. This model of networking is often on an *ad hoc* basis, in the form of project consortia<sup>7</sup> or informal “virtual” networks<sup>8</sup> which have produced a number of relevant documents in the areas of their expertise.

## More of the same

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Since the year of 2014, the parallel track enforcing the role of civil society and its relationship with national administrations in the regional cooperation development has been the Berlin Process.<sup>9</sup> It provided a high level framework enforcing many previous achievements of regional organizations and initiatives and instigating new ones. Since its launching, CSOs have been encouraged to become involved more strategically in the overall process, in particular in advocating and monitoring good neighbourly relations and reconciliation in the Western Balkans. In the Final Declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans, held in Berlin, in 2014, it was stated: “Regional cooperation shall also include the civil society level. In this context, the participating States underlined their

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<sup>6</sup> The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), Regional Convention on EU Integration, SEE Think Net and others.

<sup>7</sup> Medjak, V., et al. *Twelve Proposals for EU enlargement from the Western Balkans*, EMinS, Belgrade 2018. <http://www.emins.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Twelve-Proposals-web.pdf>  
*Western Balkans Enabling Project for Civil Society Monitoring of Public Administration Reform – WeBER, EPC, Belgrade, 2018.* <https://cep.org.rs/en/projects/weber-info-sheet-mind-y-our-reform-western-balkan-par-monitor/>

<sup>8</sup> Minic, J. editor, *Advocacy Strategy for EU Integration of the Western Balkans*, EMinS, Belgrade, 2016. This project consortium was followed by establishing the WB6 Advocacy Group.

<sup>9</sup> The Federal Government of Germany, Final Declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans, Berlin, 2014 <https://archiv.bundesregierung.de/archiv-de/meta/startseite/final-declaration-by-the-chair-of-the-conference-on-the-western-balkans-754634>

► unanimous wish to expand transnational exchange, particularly among young people.”<sup>10</sup>

At the Vienna Western Balkan Summit, in 2015, following the format of the Berlin Process, the Civil Society Forum was established. Besides a structured dialogue of numerous representatives of CSOs from the region on key issues of the democratisation process in their countries and existing and potential cooperation networks, it facilitated public dialogue between the leaders of Albania and Serbia (Edi Rama and Aleksandar Vučić) which eased the relations between the two countries and opened a way for exchange of high level visits, closer cooperation of chambers of commerce, media, NGOs, youth organisations. The most tangible results were the signing of the declaration on *Regional Cooperation and the Solution of Bilateral Disputes*<sup>11</sup> by the ministers

of foreign affairs of the WB6 initiated by experts from the Balkan in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BIEPAG) and the *Joint Declaration on the Establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office of the Western Balkans*, signed by the prime ministers, „striving to give substance to regional cooperation by way of identifying common and mutual interests aimed at strengthening people-to-people contacts and enhancing trust at the service of civic regional cooperation” and supporting “the active participation of civil society in the work of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office”.<sup>12</sup>

The Agreement on establishment of RYCO was signed by WB6 Prime Ministers on the WB Summit held in Paris, in 2016<sup>13</sup>, prepared in consultations with youth CSOs from the region. RYCO’s secretariat and grant-making mechanism are co-funded by the six Western Balkan governments,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Western Balkans Summit Vienna 2015, Addendum, Annex 3. [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/policy-highlights/regional-cooperation/20150828\\_addendum\\_western\\_balkans\\_summit.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/policy-highlights/regional-cooperation/20150828_addendum_western_balkans_summit.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Annex 2, Ibid..

<sup>13</sup> Agreement on the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, 2015 <https://www.rycowb.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Agreement-on-the-establishment-of-the-RYCO-sign%C3%A9.pdf>.

the EU, the UN, and bilateral donors. The six governments and six civil society youth representatives jointly govern RYCO, respecting the initial idea to have both governments and civil society on the same task and mission. Since the phase of conceiving the organization, representatives of youth CSOs have been actively engaged in drafting the programme, organizational structure, procedures, and budget of RYCO. The main beneficiaries are youth CSOs as well as local communities, schools and universities from WB6 with the main idea to strengthen cross-communities' dialogue.

At the May 2019 conference in Bucharest *How to Better Respond to European Aspirations of the Young Generation of the Western Balkans* under the auspices of the Romanian presidency with the European Council,<sup>14</sup> at the panel devoted

to re-imagining the Balkans in Europe, civil society representatives took a prominent role in the debate with academic society, policy experts and policy makers from both member states and candidate countries on proposing a new EU narrative for consolidating the resilience in the Western Balkans.

*A Joint Declaration on Regional Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations and a Declaration on War Crimes and Missing Persons in the Framework of the Berlin Process* were signed by the Heads of Government during the London Summit, in 2018, welcoming "the contribution that civil society organizations can make in improving regional cooperation".<sup>15</sup>

In the draft document *Progress in developing good - neighbourly relations, as provided by the Joint Declaration on* ►

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<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania. How to better respond to European aspirations of the young generation in the Western Balkans? Main conclusions and recommendations summarized by The Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Bucharest 28-29 May, 2019, [https://www.premier.gov.pl/files/files/conclusions\\_wb\\_youth\\_final\\_0.pdf](https://www.premier.gov.pl/files/files/conclusions_wb_youth_final_0.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Western Balkans Summit London, Joint Declaration on Regional Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations in the Framework of the Berlin Process; Joint Declaration on Missing Persons in the Framework of the Berlin Process; and Joint Declaration on War Crimes in the Framework of the Berlin Process, 10 July 2019, London [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/724294/180710\\_WBS\\_Joint\\_Declarations.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/724294/180710_WBS_Joint_Declarations.pdf)

► *Regional Cooperation signed in London*<sup>16</sup> prepared for the Poznan Summit, an overview of achievements was presented as well as a template for monitoring the progress. Again, the role of civil society experts in gaining official commitments and advocating reporting was substantial. The document underlined the importance of “more structured contacts of MFAs and/or PM Offices of the Western Balkan partners with CSOs” in resolving these issues.

Civil society, in particular the think tank community<sup>17</sup> from the Western Balkans, got a strong boost at the Poznan Western Balkan Summit in July 2019 where numerous panels and working sessions were organized together with their representatives in some crucial areas for development, democratization, and cooperation in the region. Ministers and policy makers were often involved

in these debates dealing with: third sector development and its role in cooperation with local governments; skills and entrepreneurial capacities of youth at the labour market; influence of environment and climate policies on economic growth; energy sector transformation; appropriate ways for making public policies in supporting new technologies and social innovation; anticorruption, threats to democracy, cultural cooperation, reconciliation, and new areas for intergovernmental cooperation. Such consultations with civil society representatives were considered as an additional value of the Berlin process in fostering regional cooperation and European integration of the Western Balkans.

In the Chair’s Conclusions, it was reported that “Western Balkan Leaders reaffirmed the essential role of civil society in building

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<sup>16</sup> Western Balkan Summit in the Berlin Process framework Progress in developing good - neighbourly relations, as provided by Joint Declaration on Regional cooperation signed in London [https://www.premier.gov.pl/files/files/report\\_on\\_good\\_neighbourly\\_relations\\_0.pdf](https://www.premier.gov.pl/files/files/report_on_good_neighbourly_relations_0.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> In the format of the Civil Society Forum and Think Tank Forum as mainstream activities of the Poznan Summit.

the participatory democracies that Western Balkan countries are striving to become, and committed to be vigilant against any threat to backsliding and shrinking space for the enjoyment of civic rights as spelled out in the legal frameworks of the region.”<sup>18</sup>

The expected role of the civil society was underlined within the EU Credible Strategy proposed by the Commission in February 2018: “Western Balkan Leaders recognized the crosscutting role that CSOs have in implementing the Western Balkans Strategy”, including their role in the “integration of the societies and cultural cooperation in fostering regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations.”<sup>19</sup>

The involvement of the expert community from the region in a structured manner in the preparation of the Summit was

praised and further support to their efforts announced. “The role of the non-governmental organization as partners for government in creating policies related to the public good has been recognized. The Leaders confirmed support for development of regional cooperation among expert groups to increase their capacities and elaborate common proposals of solutions to the crucial problems of the region.”<sup>20</sup>

The Regional Youth Cooperation Office has got special appreciation for creating opportunities for the cooperation and mobility of young people in the region and in particular for creating the Western Balkans Youth Lab (WB6 Lab), an incubator for social entrepreneurship and innovation dealing with the young leaders from the region.

Increasing initiatives in the area of



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<sup>18</sup> Western Balkans Summit Poznań. Chair’s conclusions, 5 July, 2019, Poznan.

[http://www.erisee.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/wb\\_summit\\_2019\\_poznan\\_chairs\\_conclusions.pdf](http://www.erisee.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/wb_summit_2019_poznan_chairs_conclusions.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

► scientific cooperation were confirmed by the adoption of the *Memorandum of Cooperation Framework on the South East European International Institute for Sustainable Technologies* at the Summit, and by the announcement of the Polish Academy of Sciences to hold the next Berlin Process Joint Science Conference in 2020 on future-relevant topics like environment, sustainability, energy, digital transformation, and the exchange between young scientists<sup>21</sup>, following the lines of the decision taken at the 2017 Trieste Western Balkan Summit to establish the Western Balkans Research Foundation (WBRF).<sup>22</sup> The initiative aiming to increase cooperation and exchange of scientists from the region has been developed by relevant actors from academia, universities, business, and civil society as well as international financial institutions matching the European Commission efforts in research and innovation as well as science and knowledge services through Horizon 2020 open to the Western

Balkans, and through its Joint Research Centre.

In the format of the Berlin process, at the Forum of Cities and Regions<sup>23</sup> in Rzesow, on 4-6 June 2019, a new avenue of regional cooperation was opened involving directly local communities in the region. The Forum was a meeting of cities and regions from the Western Balkans and high level guests from the Berlin Process, partners and representatives of the European Commission, European Committee of the Regions, EIB, EBRD, NALAS, municipal, local and regional governments, beneficiaries of the territorial cooperation programmes, representatives of the EC, experts, and other stakeholders.

At the high-level and expert sessions a number of issues were discussed starting from the role of smart specialization and potential of macro regional strategies to the international territorial cooperation, improvement of the quality of public

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Trieste Western Balkan Summit. Declaration by the Italian Chair, Trieste 2017. [https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/sala\\_stampa/archivionotizie/approfondimenti/trieste-western-balkan-summit-declaration.html](https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/approfondimenti/trieste-western-balkan-summit-declaration.html)

<sup>23</sup> Communiqué of Jerzy Kwieciński, Minister of Investment and Economic Development

services, transformation of mining regions, and the Via Carpatia project.

Conclusions of the session on international territorial cooperation were inspired by experiences of Interreg projects, Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance and European Neighbourhood Instrument, and achievements of Polish-German reconciliation efforts. The conclusions and recommendations were focused on “getting to know neighbours better, bringing the communities closer to each other, improving trust among nations, discussing about common history and intercultural relations... Its participants underlined the role that territorial cooperation plays in the process of building positive neighbourly relations on the internal and external borders of the EU.”<sup>24</sup> Activities of CSOs in these areas have been widespread in the Western Balkans. The additional boost through the Berlin Process is expected to make their role even more prominent.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Regional Cooperation Council <https://www.rcc.int/>

## Civil society role in activities of regional organizations

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Involvement of CSOs in numerous regional organizations evolves in different ways depending on the areas covered and type of partnership. In a number of cases this is a structured long-lasting partnership, or an ad hoc arrangement, engagement of individual experts from CSOs, or systematic support of think tanks from the region by analysis, research, and policy recommendations. The extent of CSOs inclusion in supporting regional architecture in the Western Balkans will be presented using a sample of several representative regional organizations.

**The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)**<sup>25</sup>, as a hub of the mainstream regional intergovernmental organisations, has different forms of cooperation with the ►

► CSOs from the region. Some of them are presented in the following paragraphs. For example, at the forthcoming Ministerial Conference on Environment Protection to be held in Tirana, on 27 November 2019, organized by the RCC, a number of CSOs dealing with the issue will be invited, upon recommendation of all WB6 ministries in charge of environment protection, to take part at the conference in a consultative role.

In the project *Employment and Social Affair Platform (ESAP)*<sup>26</sup>, which promotes cooperation across the Western Balkans and support for development and implementation of effective employment and social policies through building capacities of public administrations, employers' and workers' organizations CSOs have been involved according to the format of the project. The project is funded by the EU and is jointly implemented by the RCC and the International Labour Organization (ILO). In its implementation numerous think tanks, academia, trade

unions, and employers' associations have been involved in assessing the state of affairs and developing policy recommendations.

The EU funded and RCC implemented *Tourism Development and Promotion* project aimed "to create joint and internationally competitive cultural and adventure tourism offers in the six Western Balkans (WB6) economies which will attract more tourists to the region, lengthen their stay, increase revenues, and contribute to growth and employment."<sup>27</sup> This project which promotes cultural and adventure tourism niches and their global promotion, contributes to the branding of the region as a desirable tourism destination. It is implemented in close cooperation of the RCC team with numerous local CSOs which are supported by some 30 small grants from the project funds in order to improve tourism infrastructure and

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<sup>26</sup> Regional Cooperation Council, Employment and social affairs platform – ESAP [https://www.rcc.int/priority\\_areas/27/employment-and-social-affairs-platform-esap](https://www.rcc.int/priority_areas/27/employment-and-social-affairs-platform-esap)

<sup>27</sup> Regional Cooperation Council, Tourism development and promotion [https://www.rcc.int/priority\\_areas/40/tourism-development-and-promotion](https://www.rcc.int/priority_areas/40/tourism-development-and-promotion)

<sup>28</sup> Regional Cooperation Council, Tourism development and promotion project <https://www.rcc.int/download/docs/2018-11-05%20Overview%20of%201st%20Grant%20Recipients%20-%20NG%20-%20template.pdf/a896681da96871456c7adda5c6f9d5da.pdf>



services along the developed routes.<sup>28</sup>

## The Migration, Asylum, Refugees

**Regional Initiative (MARRI)**<sup>29</sup> was founded in 2004 as an intergovernmental regional organisation with a mandate to promote closer regional cooperation in the areas of migration (legal, illegal, and labour), asylum, border control, human trafficking, visa regime, readmission and return of refugees with respect to international and EU standards.<sup>30</sup>

Besides state funding, MARRI works in partnership with numerous regional and international organizations<sup>31</sup> and its work is supported by international donors and funds, such as the German Development Agency (GIZ), the UK Government, the

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), and IPA II funds.<sup>32</sup>

In terms of cooperation with civil society organizations, MARRI enlists CSOs as one of its key stakeholders along with governmental bodies, international, and regional organizations, and academia.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, as a result of the work of the MARRI-run network<sup>34</sup> of national coordinators for fight against human trafficking, joint teams for detection of victims of human trafficking composed of representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Health, and CSOs are formed in North Macedonia.<sup>35</sup> MARRI plans to advocate for implementation of this approach throughout the region. CSOs have been included in several

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<sup>29</sup> MARRI's participants are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Croatia withdrew in 2015 due to EU membership.

<sup>30</sup> Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative, About us <http://marri-rc.org.mk/about-us/>

<sup>31</sup> Such as the International Organization for Migration – Regional Mission for Central and SEE (IOM), European Asylum Support Office (EASO), International Center for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), South East Europe Police Chiefs Association (SEPCA) in 2008, Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in 2009, European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Members States of the EU (FRONTEX), Regional Arms Control Verification and Implementation Assistance Centre (RACVIAC), European Association of Airport and Seaport Police, Central European Initiative Executive Secretariat (CEI), Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe (PCC SEE), NHCR, EUROPOL, INTERPOL, and others.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Aleksandar Todosiev, Program Manager at MARRI (15 November 2019).

<sup>34</sup> MARRI has four established networks: 1) Network of heads of asylum departments; 2) Border management police network; 3) Readmission network, and 4) National coordinators for fight against human trafficking.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Aleksandar Todosiev, Program Manager at MARRI (15 November 2019).

► MARRI-administered projects, such as “Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings in the Western Balkans” Project (PaCT)” and “SFF – Strengthening regional migration governance”. In addition, MARRI plans to upgrade its cooperation with the civil society sector from the region by signing a memorandum of understanding with the Balkan Refugee and Migration Council (BRMC),<sup>36</sup> a regional network composed of seven CSOs from the Western Balkans active in the field of migration policy.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE)<sup>38</sup>**

is a regional platform for cooperation in the field of education and training which supports national reforms in education and training. It links its efforts to EU's *Education and Training 2020* programme organising numerous activities (regional thematic seminars, training events, project development workshops, study visits, international

conferences, etc.) through which it supports information exchange between member countries, member countries and EU, and global institutions. It develops regional institutional networks (South East Europe Vocational Education and Training Network - SEEVET-Net) and knowledge clusters, numerous regional projects and coordinates Education and Competences dimension within the SEE 2020 Strategy launched by the RCC. It is supported by ERI SEE member countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, and Serbia) and several international agencies. Its partners are chambers of commerce, associations of teachers, associations of entrepreneurs/employers and other related institutions and agencies at the national level as well as European agencies (i.e. European Training Institute). In the wide consultative process ERI SEE was engaged in preparing regional documents on mutual recognition of diplomas and mutual recognition of professional qualifications. Close

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<sup>36</sup> Members of BRMC are Vaša prava Bosnia and Herzegovina (VP BiH), Macedonian Young Lawyers Association (MYLA), Civil Rights Program Kosovo (CRP/K), Belgrade Centre for Human Rights (BCHR), Group 484, Albanian Helsinki Committee (AHC), and Legal Centre of Montenegro (LC). More information available here: <http://grupa484.org.rs/en/projekti/the-balkan-refugee-and-migration-council-making-a-pathway-for-a-common-western-balkan-migration-policy/>

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Aleksandar Todosiev, Program Manager at MARRI (15 November 2019).

<sup>38</sup> Centre for Education Policy, ERI SEE <https://www.cep.edu.rs/erisee>

cooperation with many organisations for informal education and training has not yet been developed.

### **Network of Associations of Local Authorities in South East Europe**

**(NALAS)**<sup>39</sup>, established in 2001, aims to enhance the process of democratisation and decentralisation in the region. It cooperates with the representative regional CSO networks with information exchange but also through task forces<sup>40</sup> focused primarily on urban planning, energy efficiency, fiscal decentralisation, solid waste and water management, sustainable tourism where some of CSO representatives provide necessary expertise. NALAS Regional Decentralisation Observatory<sup>41</sup> measures the process of decentralization in the Western Balkans by around 100 indicators related to the autonomy of local governments, quality of public services at the local level, participation and responsiveness (including cooperation with civil society) and local government associations' involvement in policy dialogue.

There is a growing interest in the European Commission to support local and regional governments in the process of adopting European standards.

**The Western Balkans Fund (WBF)**<sup>42</sup> is an intergovernmental organisation, founded by the governments of the Western Balkans. It was created with political, technical and financial support of the Visegrad Fund and became operational in 2017. The WBF aims to promote cooperation and the common values between citizens, civil society and people-to-people contacts, by providing funding for small and medium projects, in the following areas: sustainable economic development, education exchange and cooperation, and cultural cooperation. Youth, cross-border cooperation, European integration and gender, are overarching issues, covering all WBF areas of cooperation. Together with RYCO, these are the first regional funding organizations focused primarily on support to civil society in the region. ►

<sup>39</sup> MNetwork of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe <http://www.nalas.eu/>

<sup>40</sup> Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe, NALAS Task Forces: the core of NALAS Knowledge System-Interview with a Task Force Member <http://www.nalas.eu/News/System-Interview-with-a-Task-Force-Member>

<sup>41</sup> Building Administrative Capacities in the Danube Region, NALAS Regional Decentralisation Observatory [http://www.bacid.eu/NALAS\\_Regional\\_Decentralisation\\_Observatory](http://www.bacid.eu/NALAS_Regional_Decentralisation_Observatory)

<sup>42</sup> Western Balkans Fund, About us <http://westernbalkansfund.org/about-us/>

# Conclusions and recommendations

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Having in mind the previous analysis, it can be concluded that civil society is taking a growing role in the expansion and consolidation of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. A growing number of regional organisations has developed contacts and started to include CSOs, their networks and representatives in some of their core or side activities, in different formats and roles in order to increase their efficiency and effectiveness. However, there is a need of thorough analysis and a systematic approach to the involvement of civil society in strengthening and widening regional cooperation with an appropriate mapping of its strengths and capacities and capability to transfer efforts in adopting EU values, standards and reforms to the local level. A more structured approach is needed to exploit ample resources of the civil society in the EU accession of Western Balkan societies and closer cooperation in the region. This would require:

1. Establishment of a database/ registry of regional civil society networks by means of periodical mapping and relevant national centres of excellence in civil society in the Western Balkans;
2. Wider analysis of CSO's inclusion in the activities of regional organisations and their projects and development of indicators measuring their impact and relevance;
3. Bolstering their potential in improving strategic communication with EU institutions and EU Member States on achievements of regional organizations and their contribution to the EU accession process as well as with their domestic public and different target groups;
4. Organizing sectoral and general debates with civil society in the Western Balkans on how to improve their contribution in developing regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations following the model developed by the Berlin Process.

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# Information about SEE Think Net

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The SEE Think Net Network was established in mid-march 2018 with the generous support of the European Fund for the Balkans as the first regional network composed of civil society organisations that aim to monitor the topics related to the Berlin Process. The Network encompasses think tanks, civil society organisations and individuals from the 6 Western Balkan countries plus Croatia and Slovenia. Besides the Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” (IDSCS) which will coordinate the Network, the SEE Think Net Network includes the Network of the European Movement in Serbia (NEMinS), Open Society Foundation for Albania and its affiliate, the EU Policy Hub, Adnan Ćerimagić, Politikon Network from Montenegro, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, the Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO) from Croatia and the Centre for European Perspective (CEP) from Slovenia. The goal of the SEE Think Net Network is to produce significant policy inputs and provide policy recommendations on topics that derive from the Berlin Process. As such, its activities are devised in order to closely monitor the Berlin process and the policy areas the process encompasses.

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# Information about EFB

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## Link

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