



**CONDITIONALITY AND SOLIDARITY:  
FRONTLOADING COHESION  
INTO EU ENLARGEMENT TO SOUTHEAST EUROPE 6**

**April 2023**

2022 TIRANA CONNECTIVITY FORUM  
CONDITIONALITY AND SOLIDARITY:  
FRONTLOADING COHESION INTO EU ENLARGEMENT TO  
SOUTHEAST EUROPE 6

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## ABOUT THE PAPER

### CONTENT

The paper is composed by two parts.

In the first part, authors present a concrete proposal that enriches the current debate on how Enlargement can proceed by adapting to the needs of SEE6, and to the developments impacting EU and the whole European continent.

In the second part we have summarized the proceedings of TCF22 including presentations, panel discussions, Q&A and the recommendations.

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The information and data in the Tirana Connectivity Forum Paper has been obtained from sources that the authors believe to be reliable, accurate, and trustworthy. The paper includes a comprehensive summary of the discussion and debates during the Forum. For that, the authors of the paper have used the conference recordings and adapted them to the written document language. Every deviation from the original meaning as stated in the panels, is authors' only responsibility and cannot be attributed to the panelists.

Also, the authors have drawn their own takeaways after each panel. Therefore, the Paper including the opinions, conclusions and recommendations as expressed by the authors are their own, and cannot construed as reflecting the views of any other party.

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## IMPRINT

### ABOUT THE TIRANA CONNECTIVITY FORUM (TCF)

Tirana Connectivity Forum is the only such event covering connectivity, reforms and enlargement in the South East Europe region (SEE6). The Forum is the annual European benchmark that gathers stakeholders from think tanks to policy-makers involved in EU Enlargement, Regional Cooperation and Connectivity dynamics impacting the Balkans peninsula. TCF aims to create a critical mass of knowledge on the means, resources, mechanisms and impact of multi-layered connectivity in relation to growth, development, reforms, regional cooperation and the convergence of the SEE6 with the European Union (EU). TCF publishes the annual Tirana Connectivity Forum Paper.

### ABOUT THE TIRANA CONNECTIVITY FORUM PAPER

Since its first edition in 2015, TCF in collaboration with its partners regularly publishes the Tirana Connectivity Forum Paper which contributes to creating actionable knowledge on the Berlin Process, connectivity, regional cooperation and Enlargement.

This document serves as a link and knowledge transmission vector from one Summit to the next. The publication provides a balanced mix of TCF proceedings and of its main conclusions complemented with innovative insights, research products and arguments on interactions between multi-layered connectivity and development, reforms and regional cooperation.

Its main contribution is to provide innovative and impact- oriented scenarios for ever stronger linkages and speedier convergence of SEE6 with EU.

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## BACKGROUND

Twenty years after the 1st Thessaloniki Summit, EU Enlargement in South East Europe is stuck. A process that lasts for 20 years, and still has no foreseeable completion date, needs to be radically assessed and reviewed. Many valuable proposals have come forward on how to deal with this situation.<sup>1</sup> Our contribution is built upon the concept of SEE6–EU convergence and the specifics of SEE6’s own development path.<sup>2</sup>

We need to start from the narrative. Talking about EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans would mean expanding the EU population by 4.0%, its territory by 4.9% and its GDP by 0.8.<sup>3</sup> Geographically all Balkan countries’ external borders are with EU member states (MS) and de-facto the region’s economy is embedded in that of the EU.<sup>4</sup>

Second, EU assistance to the region needs reassessing. Instruments for pre-accession (IPA) funds are neither designed nor sufficient for spurring development dynamics in the SEE6 and producing convergence with EU Member States.

Amount-wise, EU grant transfers to Bulgaria are 10 times higher per capita than those earmarked for SEE6 citizens. This differential does not help the convergence requirements with EU member states.

Methodology-wise, the EU grant assistance targeting region’s development will be leveraged through Western Balkans Investment Framework loans and guarantee securities (aiming at up to EUR 30bn for 2021-27 period). This amount will be channeled through the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP), the Green Agenda and the Connectivity Agenda. Nevertheless, these funds are mobilized by an Enlargement-designed disbursement mechanism as their conception, design and delivery is top-down, inter-governmental and centralized.

Moreover, financing for the EIP, Green Agenda and Connectivity Agenda follows international financial institution (IFI) selection criteria concerning project maturity, financial efficiency, strategic priority and competition. The development criteria considered during project selection and financing, if any, are not visible.

So, while earmarked for infrastructure investment, green transition and support to growth, neither the EU policy design, the available amounts nor the financing instruments respond to SEE6 convergence obligations and the region’s cohesion needs.<sup>5</sup>

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1 See for example: “Avoid the Trap of Another Paper Exercise” by M. Bonomi, D. Reljic and A. Hackaj, IAI, 2020; “A Template for Staged Accession to the EU” by M. Emerson, M. Lazarevic, S. Blockmans and S. Subotic, European Policy Centre and CEPS, 2021; or ESI’s proposal for the SEE6 to gain full access to the EU single market.

2 Connectivity and Convergence in SEE6: A Blueprint for an EU Membership-Based Development Model, Tirana Connectivity Forum Report 2019, by Ardian Hackaj & Krisela Hackaj, CDI, 2020, at: <https://cdinstitute.eu/2021/05/10/connectivity-and-convergence-in-see6-a-blueprint-for-an-eu-membership-based-development-model/>

3 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/4031688/14589427/KS-05-22-089-EN-N.pdf/35508d49-956b-9f20-2c47-1b38636e38b6?t=1651049579047>

4 “Western Balkans ... economies are deeply integrated into the EU superstructure of the continent, more so than in the case of several EU Members”, Dusan Reljic, in “In Search of EU Strategic Autonomy: What Role for the Western Balkans”, Ed. Matteo Bonomi, IAI, 2022.

5 In IPA III regulation, the “cohesion” concept figures in two out of six specific objectives: i) to strengthen

In EU member states, territorial development challenges and convergence objectives are addressed and supported through specially designed and funded EU Cohesion policies. To be covered by those policies SEE6 countries must become EU members. That means entering the EU institutional and power-sharing framework, a perspective that keeps receding in time.

In this report we build on the current Enlargement debate, and explore innovative ways to adapt Enlargement to the situation and needs of the SEE6. Our goal is to use the existing EU-established and functioning mechanisms - without changing the Treaties - to help EU Enlargement gain traction in the South East Europe 6.

## I. CONDITIONALITY FOR AND SOLIDARITY WITH THE SEE6

Surrounded by EU member states SEE6 respond to the definition of an under-developed European region. For its under-developed regions, the Union has designed on-purpose policies. Those policies are supported by specific budgetary lines completed with the appropriate disbursement mechanism known as Cohesion and Structural Funds. Underlying this approach is the concept of “solidarity”.

We posit that solidarity is what SEE6 region and its citizen need today. The “solidarity” principle must be embedded in an updated and adapted EU Enlargement to SEE6, complementing the overarching principle of “conditionality”.

The benefits of current candidate status and of Enlargement financial compensations (i.e. the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, or IPA) are not designed to speed up convergence of the region with the EU.<sup>6</sup> Nor do they deal with potential SEE6 development risk resulting from region’s markets opening to the EU without accompanying measures.<sup>7</sup> Already, the visa liberalization and facilitation of employment arrangements by EU member states have been contributing factors to a surge in outward SEE6 migration to the EU, and the resulting brain drain.

In the past, during the relatively peaceful times of post-communist consolidation in Europe, the Enlargement approach with its intergovernmental, top-down, linear timeline, based on conditionality and with no third-party threats, has proven successful.

In 2023 the Western Balkan countries face different threats and opportunities from those that initially defined the Enlargement process. These include frequent shocks, climate change, stagnation of the Enlargement process and of its transformative power, war at Europe’s borders, or interference by third actors.

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economic and social development and cohesion, with particular attention to youth, including through quality education and employment policies, through supporting investment and private sector development, with a focus on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), as well as on agriculture and rural development, and; ii) support territorial cohesion and cross-border cooperation across land and maritime borders, including transnational and interregional cooperation. But the amounts and the governance of the delivery mechanism remain under the Enlargement logic of conditionality and project-based support.

6 “Avoid the Trap of Another Paper Exercise” by M. Bononi, D. Reljic and A. Hackaj, IAI, 2020.

7 Padoa-Schiopa underlined the same risk for the new EU members already in 1988 in his report “Efficiency, Stability and Equity: A Strategy for the Evolution of the Economic System of the European Community”, Report of a study group appointed by the Commission of the European Communities and presided by T. Padoa-Schoppa, April 1987.

Today, the Enlargement “carrot and stick” conditionality tools are both insignificant and irrelevant for SEE6 political and business elites. IPA funds are too small for SEE6 development needs while the leveraged EIP financial firepower based on IPA project selection and funding mechanism is not adapted to SEE6 development needs.

Our proposal is to upgrade the Cohesion dimension of EU policy towards the region as well as its delivery mechanisms, making solidarity an equal principle to conditionality. In practical terms, we want SEE6 accession to the EU to allow for SEE6 territory and its citizen to be covered by EU Cohesion policy. This will be a new intermediary Enlargement step.

## II. EU COHESION POLICY IS BUILT ON SOLIDARITY, AS EU ENLARGEMENT SHOULD BE

EU Cohesion policy is built on solidarity.

From the beginning the EU founders thought it would be good to help the struggling regions. Consequently, during the 1970s the focus of Cohesion policy was mainly on developing infrastructure in mountainous regions. With Enlargement it also became a way to compensate the new member states for opening their markets to more competitive industries from the west.

The EU Cohesion budget has grown over the years, from ECU 68 bn in 1988 to EUR 351 bn for the period 2021–2027.<sup>8</sup> This amount was earmarked to fund the investment in infrastructure, education, administration and social services, or to promote innovation in less-developed EU regions.

The EU solidarity principle is best observed in the way these funds are distributed – the main criteria being country wealth. Only EU regions which are relatively poorer (below 80% of average EU GDP) receive Cohesion funds at all. The distribution modalities are a mix of the criteria below:

- The European Regional Development Fund is distributed through the so-called "Berlin Formula". Devised in 1999, the Berlin Formula allocates Cohesion funds based on regional and national indicators for prosperity and unemployment.
- The funds for Interreg (territorial cooperation) are divided according to the number of inhabitants living in target border areas.
- Allocation is also a matter of political bargaining between the Commission and the member states. In the period 2014–2020, a total of EUR 9.9 billion was distributed to specific EU regions as part of negotiations between member states and the EC.

By design Cohesion works bottom-up, encourages participation and EU Commission partnership with local governments, directly impacts citizens and the regions in need, and its implementation relies incomparably less than IPA on technical assistance provided by business consulting companies.

Another advantage of the Cohesion logic is that it works independently from bilateral disputes. Differently from Enlargement where progress on bilateral disputes conditions the country's progress towards EU membership and has its own special negotiation chapter, participation in Cohesion-supported programmes and access to EU development funding bypasses the bilateral conflicts and political squabbles.

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<sup>8</sup> Money-wise, cohesion policy draws its financial muscle from the Cohesion Fund (36 billion), ERDF (226 billion), European Social Fund (99 billion), European Territorial Cooperation – Interreg (9 billion). The SEE6 already use IPA funding to be part of Interreg, the Just Transition Fund (17.5 billion) and other EU funds.

Can a Cohesion approach be better adapted to SEE6 needs? Can the Solidarity-based approach when added to conditionality reverse the migration flux, and the increasing inequalities between the SEE6 and member states? Should Cohesion be frontloaded and embedded in Enlargement strategy? Is it cheaper to do this before or after their EU membership? And, is it more efficient before or after?

We maintain that a conditionality-based Enlargement should be complemented by a major review of EU engagement in the SEE6 based on the solidarity principle.

A new EU Cohesion and Enlargement policy for SEE6 will focus on the long-term performance growth of the region by targeting its assistance to local development factors. In practical terms, it will continue to channel the EU financial support to the Common SEE6 Regional Market advancement, to Connectivity Infrastructure projects, to Green Transition, and finally bring SEE6 human capital development into focus. But due to the “size effect” of Cohesion funds (as compared with IPA grants), the above Enlargement instruments will transmute into development – hence convergence – instruments.

More importantly, the impact on the ground will go well beyond an increased EU financial injection. It is the engagement of EU institutions and SEE6 actors in every level of policy-making that will make the difference through Cohesion’s good governance dividend.<sup>9</sup>

An additional benefit will be a change in the “Balkans narrative”. Cohesion policy targets are the problems that EU regional development policy was developed to deal with. As such they resonate with EU politicians as well as with their voters. Recognizing that the SEE6 have precisely these kinds of challenges takes away the stigma and normalizes the image of the Balkans in the eyes of the EU electorate.

### **III. NO NEED TO CHANGE THE EU TREATIES: SEE6 ACCESSION WITHOUT MEMBERSHIP**

For the SEE6 countries to access EU Cohesion budget lines without being an EU member, the relationship can be qualified as de-facto EU accession without membership.

This stage does not interfere with the EU internal reforms (no effect on the current EU decision-making procedure in the Council); does not interfere with the full application of the Enlargement Conditionality principle; and allows for the Chapter-based methodology to continue as planned.

By allowing full access to Cohesion funds (we suggest this for the upcoming Financial Framework 2028–2035) the size of the “financial carrot” grows exponentially (i.e., Cohesion funds as compared with IPA funds).

Lastly, through Cohesion’s multilayered governance and impact-focused delivery mechanism, the agency of Balkans political and economic elites shifts towards other stakeholders such as SEE6 Local Government Units, Civil Society Organizations and Small Businesses.

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<sup>9</sup> In short, as they work now, before Cohesion funds are allocated to EU member states, the MS need to submit National Strategic Plans (NSPs). Moreover, the EU regions need to develop Operational Programmes (OPs) where stakeholders such as LGU and CSO must participate. Both NSPs and OPs must include an analysis of strengths, weaknesses and priorities. This approach reinforces capacity of regional authorities in policymaking as well as contributing to stronger relations between the national and regional level.

On the EU side, the member states will trade a very affordable slice of their Cohesion funds for the ability to retain exclusivity of voting in the Council. We estimate that this is a win-win situation.

The outcome will be the introduction of the missing Enlargement “intermediate stage”. Legally, in the hierarchy of normative changes as presented by Emmerson et al.,<sup>10</sup> this intermediate step will not require neither a Treaty of Accession, nor changes to EU basic treaties.

Financially, even if the SEE6 countries would be able to draw all the amounts available to them as per Cohesion policy standards, the cost to the EU budget would be “between 0.014% and 0.026% of their respective gross national income, which would amount annually to a sum between 1.6 and 10.8 euro / capita”.<sup>11</sup> But while the SEE6 countries build up their absorption and management capacity the real amounts will be sensibly lower. Notwithstanding, due to good governance dividend the SEE6 access to Cohesion funds will be far more relevant than the actual Cohesion amounts that the SEE6 would be able to draw.

Politically, a Cohesion strategy applied to the SEE6 will:

- Incentivize the EU to address the structural economic challenges common to the region as part of its own EU policy-making cycle. To give an example, in the current situation a logical move would be to include the SEE6 region in the EU New Green Industrial Deal for a Net Zero Age, or participation of SEE6 in the EU Recovery Plan. This will motivate regional actors to extend production chains beyond national borders and the EU businesses to consider the region as one market;
- Maintain and complement the Enlargement conditionality principle applied to Full Membership based on the individual SEE6 country progress. To benefit from Cohesion funds, SEE6 administrations will need to continue the reform processes and improve their governance capacity to EU standards.

Geopolitically, in a fractured and unstable world, waiting until the EU has reformed itself to allow the SEE6 to gain access to necessary funds for their convergence with the Union is risky.

Finally, EU’s own credibility of commitment in the SEE6 will be a great beneficiary of including the region in the EU own cohesion policy.

To help the SEE6 catch up with Western Europe in terms of economic productivity and living standards, it is time to start including Cohesion in debates about the future of Enlargement.

#### IV. PLANNING FOR THE 2028–2035 EU FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK

In December 2021, the EU Commission published a planning methodology for the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), reviewing and updating the 2013 and 2016 texts.<sup>12</sup> The novelty concerning the Enlargement is the addition of a new TEN-T

10 “A Template for Staged Accession to the EU”, by M. Emerson, M. Lazarevic, S. Blockmans and S. Subotic, European Policy Centre and CEPS, 2021, p. 6.

11 “The Western Balkans and the EU Budget: The Effects of Enlargement”, by V. Rant, M. Mrak and M. Marinc, in South East European and Black Sea Studies, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2020).

12 Commission Staff Working Document, on the Planning Methodology for the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), European Commission, Strasbourg, 14.12.2021 SWD(2021) 471 final.

corridor combining rail and road: called the Western Balkans European Transport Corridor. After being adapted to reflect Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the new Union guidelines for the development of the TEN-T were approved in the Council of the EU in December 2022.

But there is more. Going beyond inclusion of the SEE6 in EU policy planning, in July 2021 the Regulation 2021/1153 established the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) for the period 2021–2027.<sup>13</sup> This development gives the SEE6 full access to its overall budget of €33.71 billion in the areas of transport, digital and energy infrastructure, the same as EU member states (Article 5). While CEF is not a proper Cohesion instrument, it shows that inclusion of the SEE6 in EU policy planning and funding (with instruments other than IPA) is being done already.

Over the past three years, Cohesion funds have regularly been used beyond their designed purpose, to address crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic;<sup>14</sup> to help with the uptake of refugees from Ukraine;<sup>15</sup> and to face the energy crisis.<sup>16</sup>

If cohesion policy can change so much for COVID-19, for Ukraine or for the energy crisis, why not for the SEE6?

In a world where negative shocks are becoming the norm and mega-trends such as climate change or digitalization are accelerating, their impact on SEE6 disparity with EU and on Balkan states fragility is likely to be massive. Increasing disparities, permanent crisis and heightened uncertainty must not be allowed to harm SEE6 states' development, delay or derail their EU accession progress, nor weaken Europe's security on its southern flank.

Consequently, European vision, policy instruments towards the region and their delivery mechanisms must evolve and adapt accordingly. In this regard, the social, economic, territorial and institutional cohesion are a logical complement of EU's Enlargement policy for the SEE6 region.

We are still three years away from presentation of the proposal on the post-27 Cohesion policy. To start the planning process, the existing SEE6 Cross-Border Cooperation and EU INTERREG programmes can be used as pilots. Cross Border areas/programmes can be used as a transitional step towards full coverage from EU Cohesion funds for the SEE6 territory. Innovative elements can be introduced such as use of Cohesion elements to tackle Belt and Road Initiative competition, to encourage near-shoring, to support smart specialization, etc.

The Cohesion funds allocation formula can be reviewed to give specific weight to proper SEE6 indicators aligned with the Enlargement reforms, Regional Cooperation targets, the Economic and Investment Plan and Energy Transition.

Finally, it is worthy to bring up the fact that the biggest net contributing Member States to the EU budget – ergo Cohesion Funds) are the same that participate in the Berlin Process - i.e. Germany, France, Italy and Austria.

13 Regulation (EU) 2021/1153 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 July 2021 establishing the Connecting Europe Facility and repealing Regulations (EU) No 1316/2013 and (EU) No 283/2014.

14 In total, €13.2 billion from the 2014–2020 Cohesion Policy total funds, about 3–4% of the total, was used for the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative packages (CRII and CRII+).

15 Around €17 billion to €20 billion was made available for Cohesion's Action for Refugees in Europe (CARE) for health, education, employment and social inclusion and improving reception centres.

16 To help households and SMEs cope with high gas prices the Commission proposed redirecting unused 2014–2020 cohesion funds to cushion the blow. Called SAFE (Supporting Affordable Energy), this initiative enables member states to use up to 12.5% of Cohesion funds to expand renewables, strengthen grids, and electrify heating and industry.

## CONCLUSION

SEE6 accession to the European Union differs from the former Enlargement waves in that the current candidates are less developed than most former candidates were, given their unstable history of democratic institutions, and with the region being directly affected by developments on Europe's borders.

While the principle of conditionality is necessary to encourage the SEE6 countries to carry out the required political and economic reforms before joining the EU, the solidarity principle is needed to solidify the foundations of the SEE6 development path and secure the resilience of engaged normative and institutional reforms.

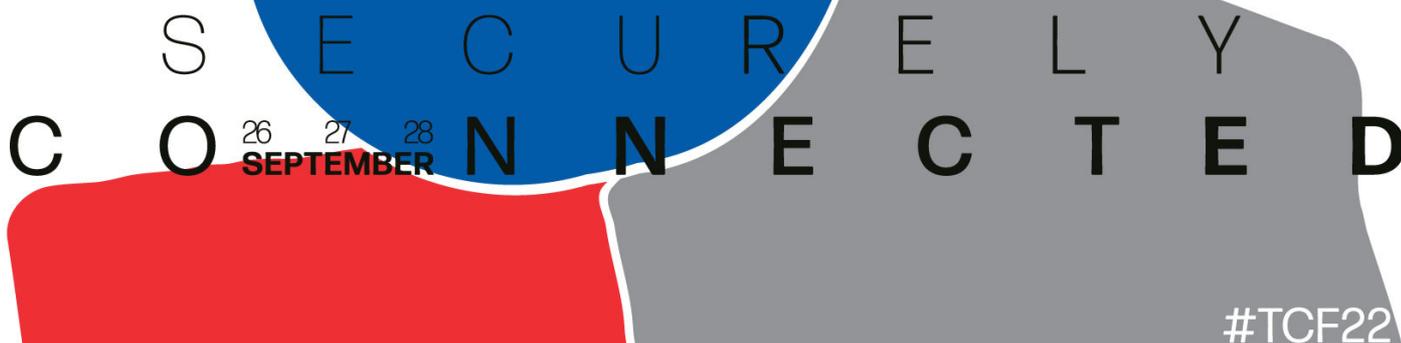
To unlock the Cohesion funds necessary for convergence with EU member states, SEE6 countries must be EU members. But to fulfil the EU membership criteria, they must make huge investments to speed up their convergence. This Catch22 must be dealt with.

But the current Enlargement methodology is a simple binary in-or-out process, resulting in waiting rooms that for the SEE6 have become permanent "parking" stations.

Moreover, SEE6 accession is facing the limits of EU absorption capacity and the precondition of EU internal reform.

In 2003, just before the Thessaloniki Summit, the Greek Presidency of the EU Council initiated reflection on embedding economic and social cohesion into the EU policy towards the Western Balkans. Two decades later, we believe that this reflection is more needed than ever.

In this paper we have supported the need to frontload Cohesion policy into Enlargement. Our goal is to: i) argue on how gradual inclusion of SEE6 countries into the EU Cohesion policy complements the new Enlargement methodology by providing a "missing intermediary stage"; ii) show why this is possible and does not depend on EU Treaty revision; iii) underline its advantages vs. costs for both the SEE6 and Europe; and iv) start discussing the timeframe and actions needed.



## PART 2. TCF22 PROCEEDINGS, 26 – 28 SEPTEMBER 2022

Tirana Connectivity Forum 2022, a yearly Forum organized by Cooperation and Development Institute, concluded its 8th edition. Themed “Securely Connected”, the three days forum held from 26-28th September, was composed of three blocks, one per each day.

Under the main title, SECURELY CONNECTED, TCF22 was composed of three main blocks extended over three days:

Day 1 – Secure and Resilient Infrastructure, focused on the new Western Balkans European Transport Corridor through the waterborne component of the Rhine – Danube corridor and the maritime Adriatic ports, and the rail component of Corridor VIII that connects the Adriatic with the Black Sea.

Organized on the premises of the Port of Durres, the first day concluded with a specific panel where National IPA Coordinators from the region and international financial institutions did outline the impact that resilience and climate change have during the infrastructure planning phase, and on their funding.

Day 2 – Secure and Well Governed Institutions, focused on the contribution of civil society actors in keeping the institutions healthy and well governed. This day brought in the best cases on how civil society can engage in policy-making and in the project cycle management of infrastructure projects. An open discussion on the Common Regional Market/Green Agenda and in the Berlin Process 2.0. tried to identify entry points and mechanisms that allow CSO to SEE6 represent citizens’ interest in those endeavours, as well as how to contribute to their implementation.

The 2nd day did conclude with a discussion with EU Member State Special Envoys for Western Balkans from Germany, Greece, Austria and Netherlands on reforms, Enlargement, the current geopolitical context and their role in supporting SEE6 countries in their EU path.

Day 3 – Secure and Future proof Enlargement focused on the role of youth in sectoral policies applied in SEE6, and how to build up on the legacy of the European Year of Youth (EYY) and of Tirana European Youth Capital 2022 (TEYC22). After the presentation of the main achievements of EYY and TEYC22, youth representatives and policymakers did debate on why and how to mainstream youth demands in EU and national sector policies.

## TCF22 DAY 1. SECURE AND RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE

The TCF 22 first day was focused on the East – West links of the new Western Balkans European Transport Corridor through waterborne transport (the Rhine – Danube corridor including Adriatic ports), and through rail (Corridor VIII connecting the Adriatic with Black Sea). TCF22 day 1 was coordinated with the Maritime Week 2022: “New technologies for a greener maritime transport” organized by Durres Port Authority; CEMA – Centre of Excellence in Maritime Affairs; the Cooperation and Development Institute; and Albanian Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy.

In this context, TCF22 kicked off with the Side Event “Blue Balkans – Waterborne Transport in South Eastern-Europe” organized in partnership with Konrad Adenauer Foundation and opened by Mr Pirro Vengu, Director of Durres Port Authority.

Distinguished professionals from SEE presented the findings of the paper “Blue Connectivity: Maritime and Inland Waterways in the Balkans Peninsula”, and then engaged in discussions with ports and waterways experts. The policy paper is the first of that kind and provides a comprehensive overview of waterborne nodes and links in South East Europe and assesses their advancement in fulfilling compliance indicators for ETC criteria. The debates further underlined the importance of ports as nodes for people and economies, as well as a detailed view of port infrastructure, governance, traffic, and TEN-T compliance indicators.

In the official opening, the Forum was greeted by the Ambassador of the Czech Republic in Tirana, HE Karel Urban, followed by a keynote address from the Ambassador of the EU in Albania, HE Christiane Hohmann. Ambassador Hohmann pointed out how through the Berlin Process, EU and the WBs are implementing an ambitious connectivity agenda in the transport and energy sectors. She underlined three pre-conditions to be fulfilled in order to get the best from the infrastructure projects: i) make progress on Common Regional Market to reach an inclusive regional economic integration, ii) have future-proof investments that contribute to green transition, and iii) have ownership of major projects and the necessity to implement them in close consultation with local communities.

The “Panel 1: Criticality of the new Western Balkans European Transport Corridor – the East-West Dimension” TCF22 welcomed the railway managers from North Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro to discuss rail infrastructure developments in the East-West axis /Corridor.VIII.

After a detailed presentation of the progress of rail infrastructure along Corridor 8 trace in North Macedonia, Mr Hari Lokvenec, Director of Public Enterprise for Railway Infrastructure Railways of Republic of North Macedonia pointed out the importance of opening the sector to young people as well as of transferring knowledge and expertise. Mr Lokvenec expressed his institution’s commitment to invest in a Center for Railways Excellence and to work along with civil society and youth organizations in this project.



In the same panel, Ms Marina Bošković Director of Railways Infrastructure of Montenegro and Mr Gentian Liko of Albanian Railways offered a comprehensive overview of the situation in their respective countries of rail infrastructure.

Closing the first day of TCF22, Panel 2: “Planning for and Funding Resilient Infrastructure”, Ms Jovana Marovic, Deputy Prime Minister and European Affairs Minister of Montenegro stated Montenegro’s commitment to the implementation of the priority infrastructure projects focusing mainly on transport and energy. In this account, she stressed the importance that civil society has in the project identification phase, on providing expertise and in monitoring infrastructure projects for a timely and qualitative implementation.

Following the discussion, Mr Ilir Beqaj, Director General of Albanian State Agency for Strategic Programming and Aid Coordination and National IPA Coordinator underlined the need to include resilience as an integral part of any feasibility study of infrastructure projects.

Deputy Prime Minister and National IPA Coordinator of North Macedonia, Mr Bojan Marickij highlighted the importance of regional coordination during the NSPP and especially when planning strategic infrastructure. During his intervention at TCF22, he outlined his proposal to gather all SEE6 NIPAC in Skopje at the earliest to coordinate the joint priorities and on a coordinated approach in the context of war in Ukraine. He also asked that SEE6 ministers in charge of energy participate in the EU Council Energy for a “When aligned totally with EU Foreign Policy vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine, SEE6 countries should also be part of the EU strategy regarding energy”, he said.

Closing the Panel 2, Mr Matteo Rivellini, Head of Division Western Balkans & Turkey, European Investment Bank Global officially declared that there will be no more financing of gas projects in the region from EIB Global.

The incisive professional debates followed by concrete proposals, policy developments and / or official declarations during the first day of TCF22, an initiative led by a civil society organization, provide tangible proof of the need of an all-inclusive approach to advancing convergence with the EU.



## TCF22 DAY 2. SECURE AND WELL-GOVERNED INSTITUTIONS

Under the main title “Securely Connected” the second day of Tirana Connectivity Forum shifted the focus to civil society and their contribution to keeping the institutions healthy and well governed through CSO contribution in the efficiency of policy-making.

The day started with the keynote address by Mr Martin Dvorak, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic presenting the Czech Presidency priorities. Mr Dvorak pointed out the importance of connectivity to EU integration, underlined the contribution of RCC, of Common Regional Market and of the Berlin Process in the Enlargement, the commitment of the Czech Presidency of the EU to involve as much as possible WB6 institutions in the formulation of policies and specifically in the solution to the energy crisis, on the need for democratic institutions to provide room for civil society engagement.

In the following intervention lecture, Prof. Loukas Tsoukalis, President of ELIAMEP delivered the Lecture: “How the War in Ukraine affects Enlargement in WBs”. Prof. Tsoukalis, pointed out that to make Enlargement work, the EU will need a stronger center so as to make the decision-making process more feasible and that more differentiation inside the EU is required. At the same time, to make the process of enlargement smoother, a “stage by stage differentiation” could be the best scenario for candidate countries allowing them a progressive integration happening at every step, and not to wait till the end of the process for full membership.

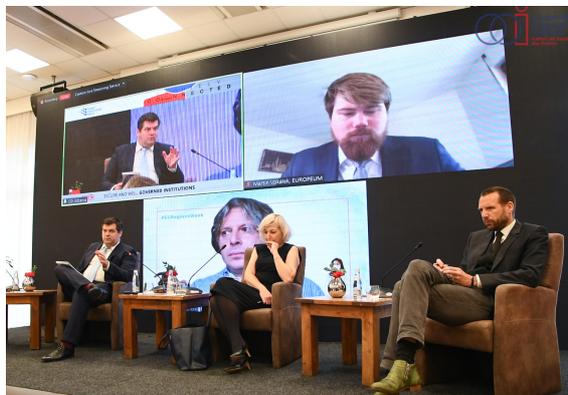
With the Panel 3, the focus shifted on how CSO can effectively improve policy-making and infrastructure project implementation in the Western Balkans. Real-life examples at the national and at EU level illustrated by best cases were brought in by a panel of CSO representatives from the region.

Mr Olsi Nika, Executive Director ECO Albania, shared his experience on campaigning about the preservation of wild rivers in the Balkans against permanent transformation as in the case of Vjosa River, and how during this 10-year-long activism they have used an array of approaches to make the decision-makers pay attention to their cause. From protests to legal action to using media and artists to build alliances and create awareness was an impressive array of the means and approaches used of a successful and impactful CSO engagement.

We continued with valuable insight from Mr Marko Sošić, Policy Analyst, Institute Alternativa in Montenegro on the importance of increasing the level of transparency and availability of data in order to properly assess the government’s performance on infrastructure projects. Ms Natasa Kovačević, Heating sector decarbonization campaigner for the Western Balkans, CEE Bankwatch Network, presented her experience on how the involvement of the CSO in the cycle of projects and on building infrastructure can impact project financing and development by IFI.



The discussion continued with Mr Naim Rashiti Executive Director, Balkans Policy Research Group, Kosovo, who focused on the challenges that SEE6 countries face, the capacity of institutions, fragmentation and the takeover of administration from political elites being the main challenges. SEE6 countries should better coordinate to and develop workable mechanisms on how to approach and deal with different problems that affect all of them, and CSO sector can be a valuable contributor in that endeavour.



Ms Pranvera Kastrati, Senior Expert on Economic and Digital Connectivity / Coordinator of the Common Regional Market emphasized the role that CSO should have during the preparation of the Action Plan of the Green Agenda. Beyond the watched role, CSO are expected to provide real contributions and in that light, RCC is planning to set up an NGO Forum on the Green Agenda. The fourth panel's main theme was policies and other

countries' best practices and these can help WB6 governments and especially think tanks and Civil Society Organizations to increase their capacity in policymaking.

Mr Márton Schőberl, Director General, Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade – IFAT, Hungary, shared some core principles that can make lobbying way more effective. What CSO from SEE6 should take in consideration according to Mr Schőberl is to keep focused on set priorities; keep the contact with the permanent representation of their home countries and team up wherever possible.

Following Mr Schőberl, his colleague Mr Martin Vokálek, Executive Director, Institute for European Policy – EUROPEUM, Czech Republic, enforced the idea that there are many challenges in order for a case to be heard but building a network can be the first step to be seen in a complex environment such as Brussels.

Ms Marta Szpala, from the Center for Eastern Studies (OSW) stressed that the role of the think tank during the negotiations was to support the government by providing information and measuring the impact of certain legislation. Mrs. Szpala continue by mentioning best practices such as the Slovakian National Convention on European Integration which included civil society. This best practice was transferred also in the WB region, namely in Serbia and can be also used in other Balkan countries.

Mr Gilles Kittel, Team Leader – IPA, Enlargement Negotiations and EUSAIR (DG REGIO) presented the main components of the new Cross-border and Transnational programs under the MFF 2021-2027. Talking about the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) as a joint platform of 10 countries (EU Member State and WB), he underlined its innovative features as the a platform where the WB countries are in the same position as Member states. EUSAIR is also a platform where the CSOs voice can be heard not only at the government level but also in the EU level.

The afternoon session was opened with the discussions on “Building Inclusive Partnerships for Efficient Policy-Making”, which debated on how CSO and Think Tanks acting as citizen representatives' proxies can contribute to improving policy-making in the region. This can be achieved by identifying and promoting entry points (such as Common Regional Market and Berlin Process 2.0) and identifying mechanisms and resources to increase citizens' influence.

Ms Milica Uvalic, Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Perugia brought to the attention that the IPA III regulation itself underlines the importance of an inclusive approach and open dialog with civil society – IPA III provides space for bigger CSO participation. Mrs. Uvalic continues by emphasizing that EIP is a very ambitious plan, however, provides an adequate opportunity for civil society to step in with their expertise and knowledge in the relevant sectors. However, this needs to be done from the identification of projects, not only in the end of the preparatory phases or during implementation.

Mr Christian Hagemann, Executive Director of Southeast Europe Association (SOGDE), Munich pointed out that the continuation of the Berlin process 2.0 is an excellent sign of Europe's commitment to the Enlargement process. This year's Western Balkans summit will be hosted by Germany and will be preceded by working groups in the different fields such as green agenda, energy transition, climate change, sustainable development of the economy, as well as CSOs involvement in infrastructure processes. Mr. Hagemann, highlighted that the expertise must come from the CSOs in the region and later reflected in the upcoming steps. SOGDE will complement the CSO consultation with direct contacts and outreach amongst CSO and policy-makers at MS and / or EU level.

Ms Pranvera Kastrati, CRM Coordinator at Regional Cooperation Council mentioned that the Berlin Process in its genesis tries to bring the Western Balkan economies closer to one another and contribute through regional cooperation for a faster and smoother EU integration process. Furthermore, Ms Kastrati mentioned that the last survey "Balkan Barometer" showed that regional cooperation concretely contributes in supporting them toward EU integration. In that view, CRM uses an inclusive approach with regard to civil society, however further improvement in terms of outreach need to be developed.

Ms Dajana Cvjetkovic, CPCD BiH / Manager of the regional project SMART Balkans, explained that this project acts as an intermediate connection between the government and the CSOs in the region so as to empower civil society involvement in transformative and reform processes. This project has a different approach than others since it believes in the capacities of the CSOs by promoting local ownership as well as what CSOs can bring to the region in terms of expertise.

The "EU Member State WB6 Special Envoys" was chaired by Mr Dušan Reljić (Head of Brussels Office, SWP) who underlined that when talking about Enlargement Policy, we also need to talk also about cohesion of the region with the rest of the Member States.



Ambassador Sofia Grammata, Greek Special Envoy for Western Balkans, highlighted the positive influence that Greece has in the enlargement and brought to the attention the 2003 Thessaloniki agenda, where the enlargement process in favor of the WB started. Ambassador Grammata, brought to the attention the commitment of Greece to the success of reforms and a speedier Enlargement of the Western Balkans.

Ambassador Jurriaan Middelhoff, Dutch Regional Envoy for Stability in the Western Balkans emphasized the strict, fair and engaged approach that the Netherlands have with Enlargement of EU in the Western Balkans, and the support of his country to their progress towards full membership.

Ambassador Manuel Sarrazin, German Special Envoy for Western Balkans, underlined that the position of the German Chancellor on the need for an enlarged European Union to change and adapt, WB6 must carry on with their unwavering reforms actively and meaningfully supported by the EU. Enlargement remains the geopolitical instrument of EU.



## TCF22 DAY 3. SECURELY CONNECTED THROUGH SECURE AND FUTURE-PROOF ENLARGEMENT

Since the first edition of TCF back in 2015, CDI has always teamed up with young people and involved youth organizations, youngsters, and civil society organizations in every edition of the Tirana Connectivity Forum.

To further contribute to the European Year of Youth and to the Tirana European Youth Capital, we joined forces with the National Youth Congress of Albania and set up joint sessions aiming to enrich the legacy of both titles.

“Secure and future-proof Enlargement” is the title we picked up for the 3rd day of TCF22, as we want the Enlargement toolbox to include youngster groups not only as beneficiaries of this process in the future but as shapers and active contributors of EU policies and their programmes today. Only by involving the youngster in all the stages of public policy both at the national, regional and EU levels, policymakers can ensure youth commitment and engagement” stated Ms Krisela Hackaj, Executive Director of CDI in her opening remarks.



This 3rd day was a great example of proving that think tanks and NGO-s can achieve great results by working on joint projects and Ms Aspasjana Kongo, General Coordinator of the Tirana European Youth Capital (TEYC), enforced this idea by sharing with the audience the successes achieved by TEYC and the features of the good cooperation established between the institutions and civil society.

TCF22 was greeted by Ms Ketil Luarasi, Deputy Mayor of Tirana Municipality. She emphasized her institution’s support for youth and their involvement in policy-making, as well as their commitment to future joint cooperation.

The first panel’s main objective was to deconstruct the process of “Building the Legacy of the TEYC”. Part of this discussion was Ms Dafina Peci, Director of the Tirana European Youth Capital, Mr Iount Sibian, President of the Western Balkans Follow-up Committee at EESC, and Tom Matthew, Board Member of the European Youth Forum.

Mr Matthew argued that in general there are very few consultations with young people and the consequences of this are massive, not only for young people but for democracy as well. For this reason, TEYC 2022 is and should be a mechanism that connects youngsters and institutions in the WBs to work together.

Based on data from the actual situation on WB6, Mr Sibian mentioned that adequate budget allocations should be dedicated to including youth organisations, as policies for youth cannot be planned without youth.

Panelists of Panel 5 tried to answer the question “Why should Youth be part of Policy-Making?” Mr Tobias Köck, the Vice President of European Movement International emphasized the importance of youth vocational and educational training to increase youth

employability in different sectors. Ms Angela Angjelovska the representative of the National Youth Council of Macedonia, representing in the panel the work of the Connecting Youth Platform, expressed her concern about the fact that youth organisations are not being heard despite their ability and expertise to help in policymaking. To this end, she presented the main conclusions of the research Paper “Sectoral Youth Employment Opportunities” as a way to contribute to better and more inclusive policies for youth.



Ms Kleina Kasanai, General Director at the Albanian National Youth Agency focused on the concept of connectivity, the keyword of this Forum as well. She highlighted the importance of internal state coordination in order to make the region’s institutions much stronger.

The last panel of this day aimed to present scenarios on co-governance mechanisms that allow youth objectives to be mainstreamed in policy-making. And OPENS was a great initiative from which we could learn a lot. OPENS representative, Vukašin Grozdanović shared his experience in working on how not to let enthusiasm and activities go together with the title. Mr Grozdanović stated that to secure the legacy of the EYC title we should invest in long-lasting programmes which should be carefully planned. Also, moving the programmes to the national level can be a good mechanism to secure the legacy, this proved to be very successful in Serbia after the Novisad EYC title ended.

Ivan Neirotti, Policy Officer at European Youth Forum proposed his suggestions regarding the mechanisms that help youth involvement in policymaking. He emphasized that youth makes a big bunch of soft connectivity and without it, there is no social culture connectivity.

Marco Costantino, from Puglia Region, Youth Policies Department policies, illustrated the best practices from the Youth Policies Department of the Apulia Region, and how this region has indeed advanced with a youth-centered intensive agenda, especially in the creative economy sectors.



## TCF22 RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE CZECH PRESIDENCY OF THE EU COUNCIL

Ahead of the historically first meeting of a broader format of European countries, the European Political Community, today in Prague, TCF22 organizers have developed the recommendations to the Czech Presidency of the EU Council.

The recommendations highlight the main conclusions resulting from the 8th edition of Tirana Connectivity Forum (TCF22) held on 26-28 September 2022, and have been submitted to the Czech Presidency of the EU. They respond to the Opening Speech of TCF22 delivered by Mr Martin Dvorak, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Recommendations of Tirana Connectivity Forum 22 to Czech Presidency of the EU Council are as below:

- In the current geopolitical context, the European Union should involve Western Balkans 6 in strategic areas of EU decision-making. This will secure Europe's Southern Flank, increase the EU's resilience, support the old continent's growth and a green transition, as well as contribute to the convergence of WB6 with the EU;
- European Union and Western Balkans 6 institutions must create the space and support the engagement of civil society organizations in policy-making. Only transparent, accountable and well-governed institutions can be secure, resilient, reliable and efficient partners;
- European Union and Western Balkans 6 must include the Youth dimension as a transversal component of all their policies and flagship projects in the Western Balkans. Youth should be shapers of EU policies & programs and not only their beneficiaries.

With regard to Recommendation 2 and Recommendation 3, we estimate that the EU Economic and Investment Plan and the EU Green Agenda, by their financial engagement and tangible impact in the daily life of WB6 citizen, are among the most relevant initiatives needing citizen engagement and a structured contribution of CSOs.

TCF22 was part of the Official calendar of the Czech Presidency of the EU for the 2nd Semester of 2022.

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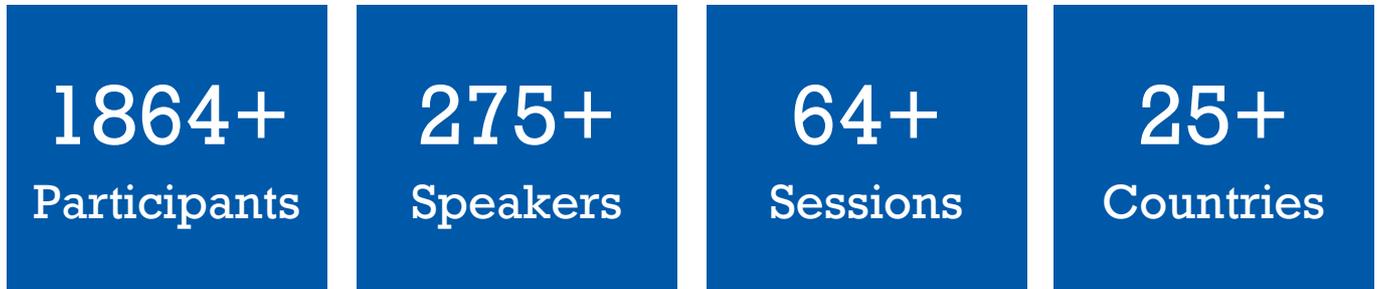


## PART OF THE OFFICIAL CALENDAR:



# FACT AND FIGURES

TCF 2015-2022



## SAVE THE DATE



[www.tiranaconnectivityforum.org](http://www.tiranaconnectivityforum.org)