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## Table of Contents

List of abbreviations .....	4
Executive summary .....	5
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2. Macroregional Collaboration – drivers, challenges, and benefits .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3. Existing macroregional collaboration in the WBs .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>4. Macroregional collaboration in the Western Balkans under the Green Agenda Theme .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>5. Assessment of GAWB Action Plan Development and Implementation Process.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>6. Conclusions and recommendations for improving GAWB development and implementation processes .....</b>	<b>26</b>
6.1. GAWB Action Plan Formulation Recommendations .....	28
6.2. GAWB Action Plan Implémentation Recommendations .....	29
6.3. GAWB Action Plan Financial Recommandations.....	31
6.4. GAWB Communication Recommendations .....	32
<b>References .....</b>	<b>32</b>
Annex 1. Overview of Interviewees.....	35

## List of abbreviations

<b>BGF</b>	Balkan Green Foundation
<b>CARDS</b>	Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development, and Stabilisation
<b>CEFTA</b>	Central European Free Trade Agreement
<b>CRM</b>	Common Regional Market
<b>CSF WB</b>	Civil Society Forum of the Western Balkans
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organisation
<b>DG-NEAR</b>	Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
<b>EBRD</b>	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>EFSD</b>	European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus
<b>EGD</b>	European Green Deal
<b>EIB</b>	European Investment Bank
<b>EnCS</b>	Energy Community Secretariat
<b>EUKI</b>	European Climate Initiative
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EUSDR</b>	EU Strategy for the Danube Region
<b>EUSAIR</b>	EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region
<b>GAWB</b>	Green Agenda for the Western Balkans
<b>GAD</b>	Green Agenda Days
<b>IFI</b>	International Financial Institutions
<b>IUCN</b>	International Union for Conservation of Nature
<b>IPA</b>	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
<b>LSG</b>	Local self-governments
<b>NALAS</b>	Network of Associations of Local Authorities of Southeast Europe
<b>OSF-WB</b>	Open Society Foundations - Western Balkans
<b>RCC</b>	Regional Cooperation Council
<b>RAB</b>	Research Advisory Board
<b>SEECF</b>	South-East European Cooperation Process
<b>SAP</b>	Stability Pact for Southeast Europe and the Stabilisation and Association Process
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SWG RRD</b>	Standing Working Group on Regional Rural Development
<b>TG-WEB</b>	Western Balkan Network on Territorial Governance
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>WB</b>	Western Balkans
<b>WBIF</b>	Western Balkans Investment Framework

## **Executive summary**

This paper explores opportunities for building more effective macroregional collaboration structures to support the development and implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB), and more broadly the cooperation structures that can help advance the implementation of the Growth and Investment Plans for the Western Balkans. The GAWB represents a unique experiment in promoting macroregional collaboration under key Green Agenda policy themes. Macroregional collaboration is crucial for building climate and environmental policy synergies and cohesion between Western Balkan (WB) countries, while also supporting EU accession processes by increasing alignment with the goals and targets of the European Green Deal (EGD). The paper provides an overview of existing macroregional collaboration structures in the WBs, zooming in on macroregional cooperation efforts in the delivery of key GAWB policy themes. The assessment includes a critical review of the challenges that were faced in designing and implementing the GAWB Action Plan. The paper provides practical recommendations for improving macroregional collaboration processes in the delivery of the GAWB. In addition, the paper provides recommendations on how to improve GAWB Action Plan formulation and implementation processes. These recommendations are targeted at WB policy and decision-makers, including the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), to help support the ongoing GAWB Action Plan evaluation and revision processes.

## 1. Introduction

Macroregional cooperation between WB countries is not a new phenomenon. WB countries (except Albania) have already experienced union under Yugoslavia between 1918 and 1992. Path dependencies related to economic trade links, and physical infrastructure remain from that period. A new wave of regional cooperation is represented by the Open Balkan Initiative introduced in 2021. The Open Balkan Initiative, involving Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, is an example of this renewed cooperation framework which seeks to facilitate trade, enhance freedom of movement for people and goods, and ultimately create a more interconnected regional market. Macroregional cooperation between WB countries and other European states is also commonplace, fostered through European Union (EU) accession (see the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)) proceedings under the Berlin Process, and the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans adopted by the EU Commission in 2023 . The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans serves to boost economic opportunities in the region focusing on infrastructure connectivity, sustainable development, and integration with the EU market. These EU initiatives aim to improve connectivity and infrastructure in the WB region by increasing transportation networks, fostering economic growth, and supporting regional integration.

Since the 1990s, macroregional cooperation has also been enhanced through the participation of different WB countries in other transnational frameworks, including the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) as part of membership of the RCC, the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), and direct involvement in core EU Cohesion Policy pillars, including EU Macroregional Strategies and Interreg Programmes. There is a strong willingness amongst policy and decisionmakers across the WBs to participate in macroregional collaborative activities. Converse to general opinion, WB countries are not disconnected islands, but macroregional connections already exist and continue to develop between WB countries and other Eastern European and Adriatic-Ionian states.

The main drivers of macroregional collaboration in the WBs are EU accession, funding, and knowledge sharing (Berisha, 2024). In recent years, macroregional cooperation has centred on climate and environmental issues, particularly promoting greater alignment and cohesion around the goals and targets of the European Green Deal (EGD). To become a climate leader, the EU is keen to export its new climate and environmental policy initiatives to neighbouring countries, accession and pre-accession states (European Commission 2022). To facilitate this, the EU provides policy and financial support for developing and implementing the EGD in EU candidate and pre-accession countries, including those in the WBs. At the Berlin Process Summit in Poznań in July 2019, WB leaders expressed their willingness and readiness to meaningfully promote and contribute to the implementation of the EGD, supporting EU efforts to fight climate change, protect the environment, and unlock the economic potential of the green, low carbon, and circular economy in the region (RCC 2021).

In November 2020, the leaders of the WB countries signed the Sofia Declaration, which stated, 'we commit to work towards the 2050 target of a carbon-neutral continent together with the EU through mainstreaming a strict climate policy and reforming energy and transport sectors.' (RCC, 2020). The Sofia Declaration laid out a number of climate and environment-related actions, including a commitment of each WB country to align with EU Climate Law and EU Emissions Trading Scheme, set forward-thinking 2030 energy and climate targets, prepare and implement climate mitigation strategies, participate in the European Climate Pact, and transpose the EGD within all climate and environmental policies and interrelated policy sectors (Ibid).

In meeting these commitments, the 2020 Sofia Declaration outlined plans to develop the GAWB (GAWB) (RCC 2020). The GAWB is a growth strategy designed to support climate and energy transitions and the shift to sustainable carbon-neutral economies and societies across the WBs (RCC 2021). The GAWB and the corresponding GAWB Action Plan introduced in 2021, are expected to support the EU accession processes by attempting to build policy links and cohesion between WB countries under key green agenda policy sub-themes closely aligned with the EGD and other EU climate targets (Berisha, 2025). The GAWB Action Plan provide opportunities for macroregional cooperation building in the WBs under the green agenda policy theme (Moodie et al 2025).

### *Aims of Paper*

The aim of this paper is to explore opportunities for building more effective macroregional collaboration structures to support the development and implementation of the GAWB. The paper examines existing macroregional collaboration structures and activities involving WB countries, zooming in on macroregional cooperation initiatives targeted at climate and environmental policy themes under the GAWB Action Plan. This analysis includes an assessment of the relative challenges faced in the development and implementation of the GAWB Action Plan. Based on this analysis, the paper develops practical recommendations for improving macroregional collaboration processes that support the delivery of GAWB Action Plan goals and targets. These recommendations are designed to support the ongoing GAWB Action Plan revision processes.

### *Research and Data*

The assessment is built on a mixed research method approach. This includes a desk-based analysis of core GAWB documents, such as the GAWB Action and Plan and GAWB Implementation Report, and a review of academic and policy literature on macroregional collaboration and the GAWB. The documentary data is supplemented by semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews conducted with 19 stakeholders across the WBs in 2024. Actors interviewed included those responsible for leading the GAWB Action Plan process i.e., RCC representatives, and a variety of relevant actors involved in GAWB Action Plan development and implementation processes i.e., national and government representatives, representatives from local level authorities, NGOs, academia and international political organisations. The documentary analysis and interview data has been triangulated to draw assessment on the GAWB Action Plan formulation and implementation process.

### *Structure of Paper*

The paper is structured as follows. Part 1 explores the key features of the concept of macroregional collaboration within a European context. Part 2 provides a contextual overview of the existing macroregional collaboration structures within a WB context. Part 3 reviews the participation of WB countries in macroregional cooperation structures based on key GAWB policy themes. Part 4 assesses the challenges surrounding the development and implementation of the GAWB Action Plan. The final Part 5 provides practical recommendations for improving macroregional collaboration in the deployment and implementation of the GAWB Action Plan. The recommendations target WB policy and decision-makers, including the RCC, and feed into ongoing GAWB Action Plan evaluation and revision processes.

## **2. Macroregional Collaboration – drivers, challenges, and benefits**

Throughout the paper, the term macroregional collaboration is used to refer to a range of different macroregional, transnational and cross-border cooperation frameworks, policies, and projects that involve two or more countries. The notion of macroregional cooperation has become more prominent in policy and academic discourse since the emergence of the first EU macro-region in 2009, which represented a new governance tool for promoting EU integration and cohesion (Gänzle and Kern, 2016). An EU 'macro-region' is 'an area including territory from a number of different countries or regions associated with one or more common features or challenges' (European Commission, 2009). The European Commission notes that a macroregional collaboration is characterised by: 1) an integrated framework involving EU Member States and third countries in the same geographical area; 2) who work together to addresses common challenges and opportunities; and 3) benefits from collaborating through strengthened cooperation and enhanced economic, social and territorial cohesion (European Commission, 2013). Ultimately, macroregional collaboration aims to substantiate the goal of enhanced territorial cohesion introduced by Article 174 of the Treaty of Lisbon.

Since 2009, four EU macroregional collaboration structures have been developed for the Baltic Sea, Danube, Adriatic-Ionian, and Alpine regions (European Commission 2013). WB countries also participate in EU macro-

regions under different constellations, i.e.: Adriatic-Ionian Macroregion (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia), and the Danube Macroregion Countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia). The EU has played the role of “external facilitator” in macroregional development (Gänzle & Mirtl, 2019). In the early stages of developing the macroregions concept, the European Commission emphasized the three ‘no’s’: no new EU legislation, no new EU institutions and no new EU budget should be used to provide direct and immediate support to the formulation EU macroregional strategies. Macroregions are to be built on existing rules, governance arrangements and financial resources both nationally and internationally (European Commission, 2009). Each microregion produces a macroregional strategy, which are accompanied by a rolling macroregional Action Plans that are regularly updated in light of newly emerging needs, challenges, opportunities, and changing contexts (European Commission 2013). Areas of policy cooperation vary across macroregions, ranging from transport, environment, climate, biodiversity, institutional infrastructure and economic development, education, skills development, tourism and civil security. The policy themes reflect macroregional geographical specificities and political priorities and contribute towards meeting EU Green Deal priorities.

In a WB context, macroregional collaboration is an important mechanism for promoting EU integration (Ágh 2016). One of the major objectives of EU macroregional collaboration is to contribute towards EU integration processes in the WBs and ‘to bring [...] WB countries closer to the EU by offering them opportunities for working closely with Member states’ (European Commission 2014: 3; Solly and Berisha, 2021; Berisha 2023). Increased functional cooperation and the deepening of vertical and horizontal ties between the EU and third countries can enable joint problem-solving, progress the quality of democracy, and increase EU integration (Schymik 2011). Macroregional collaboration also offers a structure to postpone further EU full member enlargement, while still promoting cohesion and integration (Ibid). As Ágh (2016) notes through participation in macroregional collaboration programmes and projects, civil society and political actors from non-EU states become increasingly entangled in personal and institutional relationships with EU member states which socialises them to European norms and procedures. Enhanced macroregional collaboration and EU accession is viewed as important for resolving some key challenges in the WB region including promoting political stability, decreasing ethno-nationalism, settling territorial conflicts, and increasing economic growth (Schymik 2011).

There are multiple factors that drive macroregional collaboration. Common characteristics connect WB and European countries and provide a catalyst for collaboration, including shared socio-economic characteristics, history, tradition, cultures, and strong trading relationships (Sielker & Rauhut, 2018). Shared territorial issues bring together countries with similar socio-economic and environmental obstacles or opportunities. For Majone (2014), climate and environmental challenges present a common shared challenge where the scope of the problem is regional rather than EU-wide, therefore, this issue is best tackled through macroregional collaboration with policies tailored to the scope of the macroregional context. A key driver of macroregional collaboration is the need to reduce disparities, build cohesion, and promote integration between existing EU member states, EU accession states, and non-EU states (Sielker, 2016). Finally, there is political level support for macroregional collaboration. An informal, flexible and soft approach to transnational and cross-border cooperation appeals to national actors, as they can maximise the benefits of policy and funding opportunities without committing to more formalised structures (Gänzle and Kern, 2016).

Macroregional collaboration has been criticized for being predominantly top-down and driven by intergovernmental discussion rather than a bottom-up stakeholder approach (Gänzle et al 2019). This is reflected in an unwillingness of national actors to devolve collaborative policy development to regional and local levels whose role is generally limited in determining the direction of policy and funding (Sielker 2016). Macroregional collaboration often deals with very broad policy themes to accommodate the views and perspectives of different nation states; therefore, policies and activities are equally broad and do not target specific issues or territorial scales. The lack of a formal regulatory and funding framework devoted to macroregional collaboration means that agreed goals and objectives can only be met if there is strong political

leadership and close alignment between macroregional goals and existing regulatory and funding structures at EU, national, regional and local levels (Gänzle & Mirtl 2017).

Macroregional collaboration also brings many benefits, such as, promoting territorial cohesion and supporting neighbourhood region building which can speed up policy and spatial integration between different countries (Gänzle & Mirtl 2019). Macroregional collaboration brings together institutional actors and other key stakeholders to identify policy solutions that overcome shared regional challenges and maximize opportunities. Working together can strengthen multi-level governance both vertically (between government tiers/geographical scales) and horizontally (between stakeholders and across sectors), while also strengthening existing networks, building new networks, and enhancing trust and social capital between participants (Dubois et al 2009). Macroregional collaboration also provides a framework for encompassing international and supranational strategies and agendas, ensuring they become more targeted at relevant territorial scales (Sielker & Rauhut, 2018).

The emergence of EU macroregions has generated considerable academic attention in both the fields of planning studies and political science. Macroregions have been assessed from a range of conceptual and theoretical perspectives. Macroregions are viewed as a recent institutional innovation in the EU focused on strategically designed region-building (Warleigh-Lack et al., 2011). They are contributing to 'place-based' policies that may ultimately foster the emergence, consolidation, and permanence of new regions (Agh 2016). Macroregions are also considered new large-scale geographies and spatial imaginaries, which can be understood as examples of soft spaces (Allmendinger et al 2014). Cooperation in these soft spaces can be characterized as soft planning (cf. Faludi 2010), bringing about new forms of voluntary coordination, negotiation and learning in informal settings between different actors, while facing a fragmentation of competencies and scarce personnel and financial resources. Macroregions have also been seen as exercises in experimentalist governance (Gänzle 2017; Gänzle & Mirtl 2019). Experimentalist governance is 'a recursive process of provisional goal-setting and revision based on learning from the comparison of alternative approaches to advancing them in different contexts' (Sabel and Zeitlin, 2010). Macroregions follow an experimentalist governance approach as they constitute broad frameworks and joint endeavours decided among authorities at different territorial levels of government (e.g. supranational, national, subnational), which mobilise institutional and non-institutional actors towards agreed policy priorities (Gänzle, 2017b; Gänzle and Mirtl, 2017a, 2017b). Participation in macroregions is also meant to stimulate Europeanisation processes. Stakeholder participation in macroregional territorial policy communities promotes 'slipstream Europeanisation'. Collaboration in transnational macroregional networks facilitates Europeanisation processes within national and regional level institutions and organisations (López and Tatham 2018).

### **3. Existing macroregional collaboration in the WBs**

Macroregional cooperation initiatives in the WBs can be distinguished in three main categories: 1) EU level driven – where the EU plays the role of cooperation facilitator; 2) EU countries driven – where some EU member states and other non-EU countries initiate parallel cooperation activities in order to facilitate EU integration; and finally, 3) Locally driven – where WB's countries activate cooperation initiatives independently and voluntarily in bilateral and multilateral forms (Moodie et al., 2025).

According to Rogelj (2015), the EU's engagement with the WBs can be divided into four distinct phases. The first phase, 1989-1995, was focused on crisis management in the immediate post-communism period, focusing on humanitarian aid and economic assistance in individual WB countries. In the second phase, 1996-1999, the EU shifted from a national to a regional approach promoting democracy, rule of law, and economic reforms across all Balkan countries. This strategy had limited success and was seen as reactionary, lacked adequate financial resources, and did not promise EU membership, undermining regional enthusiasm for cooperation. This period demonstrated the need for a more cohesive, long-term EU strategy towards WB integration, starting with the Stabilisation and Association Process (third phase 1999-2003). The Stability Pact for

Southeast Europe and the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) was a turning point towards a more comprehensive EU strategy. It introduced structured reforms in governance, rule of law, and economic development, ultimately guiding WB nations toward potential EU candidacy. New instruments like CARDS (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development, and Stabilisation) and later IPA were introduced to support regional reforms. The fourth phase includes current enlargement challenges (2005–2022), as economic and political crises raised doubts about the EU's capacity to integrate new members. In 2018, the EU introduced a new strategy for WB enlargement, while in 2020, a new methodology for the EU Enlargement was launched, aiming at facilitating WB integration, making the process more credible, dynamic, predictable and political. Recently, we have entered into the fifth phase (2022 – to present), in which the integration process is being boosted due to the geopolitical tensions triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The EU Enlargement process has been influential in setting several cooperation initiatives at various levels. WB countries are in part members of the EUSAIR and EUSDR. Regional cooperation is effectively supported by Interreg programmes like the one focused on transnational cooperation. In the current programming period (2021-2027) the region is benefiting from: Interreg IPA ADRION, EU-MED, Danube, Central Europe, and only recently from URBACT IV and Interreg Europe and WB countries like Serbia and Albania are observatory of ESPON. Key initiatives supported by transnational cooperation include the Forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce; the Associations of Universities of Adriatic Ionian Region (UniAdriion) and the Forum of Adriatic and Ionian Cities. A contribution to regional cooperation is also given by the Adriatic Ionian Euroregion launched in 2006. Additionally, cooperation in the region has been increasingly important at the cross-border level with the various programmes supported by the European Territorial Cooperation (Pinnavaia and Berisha, 2021). To date, there are 23 programmes with cross-border character among which: 3 cross-border cooperation programmes between regional EU Member States, 10 between EU member states and candidate countries and 10 between candidate countries.

Cooperation initiatives have also been launched by EU member countries independently from the EU institutions. For instance, the region is included in the Central Europe Initiative (CEI), established in 1989. The CEI is an intergovernmental forum of 17 Member States in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe that focuses on fostering European integration and promoting sustainable development through regional cooperation. Similarly, the Adriatic Ionian Initiative, established under the auspice of the Italian government as part of the First Ancona Declaration in 2000, aims at reconciling the region. This initiative helps to promote regional cooperation and political and economic stability, creating a solid base for the process of European integration (Berisha, 2023). The RCC, launched in 2008 as part of the South-East European Cooperation Process, supports developing and maintaining a political climate of dialogue, reconciliation, tolerance and openness towards cooperation, with a view to enabling the implementation of regional programmes. Under the same logic of increasing cooperation, Germany launched the Berlin Process in 2014 as an intergovernmental regional initiative aimed at giving new momentum to the languishing enlargement process. The Berlin process provides a framework for closer regional cooperation based on three main pillars: economic growth and connectivity, democracy and rule of law, and resolution of bilateral disputes. The Berlin Process has fostered several correlated cooperation initiatives like the Civil Society Forum (Vienna 2015), Regional Youth Cooperation Office (Paris 2016), and Common Regional Market initiative (Sofia 2020).

In parallel with these initiatives, the WBs is increasingly involved in regionally led cooperation initiatives like the Open Balkans launched in 2021 as an economic and political zone involving Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia. Although it has been criticised as exclusive, the initiative is recognised for promoting home-born collaboration efforts (CEA, 2023a; CEA, 2023b). Bottom-up regional initiatives have also been launched at different scales and with different objectives, such as, the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of Southeast Europe (NALAS) launched in 2001 and the WB6 Chamber Investment Forum (WB6 CIF), developed in 2017 by chambers of commerce and industry from the WBs to facilitate business dialogue and attract investment in the region. Informal cooperations initiatives are activated by local organisations, universities and research centres aiming at fostering cooperation and knowledge exchange (see for instance TG-WEB

Network). Built on the above cooperation experiences, the GAWB was launched in 2020 to facilitate collaboration and speed up the EU Integration process by focusing on the EGD targets and objectives (Berisha, 2024).

In Table 1, we classify the different forms of organisations, platforms, or networks that are relevant in a macro-regional perspective in the WBs, which in most cases cover areas larger than the six countries. These are classified as 1) Transnational political-based collaboration: the existing platforms for cooperation are considered top-down, too formal, or too political to be able to establish more hands-on dialogue on issues of common interest. 2) Transnational project-based collaboration: these are too often steered by 'clients' or funders' demands, based on perceptions of what the region needs from the outside, rather than focusing on issues of genuine local interest. And 3) Transnational bottom-up collaboration: these can play a central role in promoting place-based policymaking, yet are often ignored or lack the instruments to make a significant and continuous impact.

More specifically, collaborative structures listed in Table 1 are described in terms of their mandate and activities related to governance and the green transition. It also offers commentary on their effectiveness, challenges, and contributions in these domains within the WB context. This systematic presentation allows for direct comparison of these structures.

The landscape of collaborative efforts is heavily shaped by the EU accession process. Frameworks such as the EU Enlargement Strategy, the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP), and the GAWB, which mirrors the EGD, serve as dominant reference points, particularly for political and project-based initiatives. This underscores the EU's significant agenda-setting power but also raises considerations regarding regional ownership and the adaptation of initiatives to the specific contexts of the WB6 countries.

*Table 1. Types of macroregional collaborative structures involving WB countries*

Organisation/ platform/ network	description
<b><i>Transnational political-based collaboration</i></b>	
<b>Berlin Process</b>	<p><b>Description:</b> High-level intergovernmental forum initiated by Germany involving WB6, EU Member States, UK, and EU institutions. Aims to foster regional cooperation and support the WB's EU perspective.</p> <p><b>Governance:</b> Promotes good neighbourly relations, addresses bilateral issues, anti-corruption commitments, rule of law fundamentals (implicitly via EU integration focus), Roma integration declaration.</p> <p><b>Green Transition:</b> Endorsed GAWB, produced implementation guidelines, holds dedicated ministerial meetings (e.g., Hamburg 2024), supports energy security/transition (e.g., €1bn energy package announced 2022), includes sustainability/renewable energy programmes under economic cooperation.</p> <p><b>Effectiveness:</b> Successful in maintaining political dialogue, fostering regional cooperation (e.g., Common Regional Market), and mobilizing political support/funding for key initiatives (connectivity, GAWB, energy). Provides high-level impetus.</p> <p><b>Challenges:</b> Impact depends heavily on national implementation and political will of participating states. Commitments made at summits may face delays or inconsistent follow-through due to domestic politics or bilateral disputes. Governance aspects (anti-corruption) appear less developed than economic/connectivity/green agendas.</p> <p><b>Contributions:</b> Key political framework reinforcing EU perspective, catalyst for Common Regional Market (CRM) and GAWB adoption, mobilized significant funding (e.g., energy package).</p>
<b>Open Balkan Initiative</b>	<p><b>Description:</b> Initiative involving Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia aimed at creating a common economic zone based on the EU's four freedoms (goods, services, capital, people).</p>

	<p><b>Governance:</b> Focuses on facilitating free movement, particularly labour market access via electronic permits, reducing border waiting times. Aims to simplify administrative procedures for citizens/businesses within member states.</p> <p><b>Green Transition:</b> No explicit mention of environmental cooperation, green standards, or climate action within the initiative's core framework or provided documentation.</p> <p><b>Effectiveness:</b> Has facilitated labour mobility and potentially reduced some trade barriers among the three participating members.</p> <p><b>Challenges:</b> Limited membership (excludes BiH, Kosovo*, ME) raises concerns about regional fragmentation vs. inclusive initiatives like CRM/Berlin Process. Lack of explicit alignment with broader EU governance (RoL, anti-corruption) or green transition agendas limits its scope. Potential for overlap or political tension with EU-led processes.</p> <p><b>Contributions:</b> Demonstrates willingness for sub-regional cooperation on economic matters, potentially offering practical benefits for citizens/businesses in member states.</p>
<p><b>Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)</b> (Political Interface)</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> Regional cooperative framework for South East Europe (including WB6), successor to Stability Pact. Operational arm often linked to political processes like SEECP and Berlin Process.</p> <p><b>Governance:</b> Key role in coordinating/monitoring Common Regional Market (CRM) implementation (trade facilitation, investment, mobility), supports SEE2030 Strategy, produces Balkan Barometer (public/business opinion data), facilitates security cooperation (justice networks).</p> <p><b>Green Transition:</b> Designated coordinator for GAWB implementation, supports drafting/monitoring of GAWB Action Plan, facilitates Regional Working Group on Environment &amp; Biodiversity Task Force, raises awareness, promotes green skills/jobs (Youth Lab).</p> <p><b>Effectiveness:</b> Acts as a crucial regional hub, translating political goals (Berlin Process, GAWB) into actionable plans and coordinating technical work. Provides essential data (Balkan Barometer) and platforms for stakeholder engagement.</p> <p><b>Challenges:</b> Effectiveness depends on the political commitment and administrative capacity of participating governments and institutions. Coordination across diverse actors remains complex. Securing sustainable funding for its wide range of activities can be a challenge.</p> <p><b>Contributions:</b> Primary regional body for coordinating GAWB and CRM implementation. Provides continuity and institutional memory for regional cooperation efforts. Bridges political dialogue with technical implementation.</p>
<p><b>Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC)</b></p>	<p><b>Description:</b> Intergovernmental forum including Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia alongside Black Sea littoral states. Aims to foster interaction, peace, stability, prosperity through cooperation in various areas.</p> <p><b>Governance:</b> Promotes friendly/good-neighbourly relations, cooperation on combating organized crime.</p> <p><b>Green Transition:</b> Dedicated Working Group on Environmental Protection promotes cooperation, knowledge sharing, addresses marine environment, waste, climate change adaptation (BSEC Climate Change Adaptation Strategy), air quality, green growth.</p> <p><b>Effectiveness:</b> Provides a broad platform for dialogue among diverse member states. Environmental WG actively discusses relevant issues.</p> <p><b>Challenges:</b> Wide geographical scope and diverse membership may dilute focus compared to WB-specific initiatives. Direct impact on core WB green transition priorities (energy decarbonization, EU acquis alignment) likely less significant than Energy Community or RCC/GAWB efforts. Political tensions within the wider Black Sea region can affect cooperation.</p> <p><b>Contributions:</b> Offers a forum for WB members to engage with Black Sea neighbours on shared environmental concerns (e.g., transboundary pollution, climate impacts).</p>

<p><b>Council of Europe (CoE)</b> (Political / Normative)</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> Pan-European organization (including all WB6) dedicated to upholding human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.</p> <p><b>Governance:</b> Sets standards through conventions (e.g., European Convention on Human Rights, conventions against corruption), monitors compliance (e.g., GRECO for anti-corruption, Committee of Ministers), provides legal/constitutional assistance (Venice Commission), supports judicial independence (ECtHR jurisprudence). Active cooperation programmes in WB focus on RoL, democracy, anti-corruption.</p> <p><b>Green Transition:</b> Mandate includes Directorate of Social Rights, Health and Environment.<sup>33</sup> Links between human rights and environment increasingly recognized. Congress of Local and Regional Authorities addresses climate change at local level.</p> <p><b>Effectiveness:</b> Provides the fundamental normative framework for democracy and rule of law in Europe, directly influencing EU accession criteria (Copenhagen political criteria). Monitoring mechanisms (GRECO, ECtHR) exert pressure for reform.</p> <p><b>Challenges:</b> Effectiveness heavily relies on member states' political will to implement standards and recommendations. Enforcement mechanisms are primarily political and legal, not financial. Progress on RoL in WB remains slow despite CoE engagement, often due to state capture and lack of political will.</p> <p><b>Contributions:</b> Essential standard-setter and monitor for core European values (democracy, human rights, RoL). Provides benchmarks for EU accession process. Supports specific reforms through cooperation programmes.</p>
<p><b>Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)</b> (Trade Focus)</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> Trade agreement among WB6 + Moldova, aiming to enhance trade, eliminate barriers, attract investment through harmonized rules based on EU/WTO standards.</p> <p><b>Governance:</b> Establishes rules for trade in goods/services, addresses competition/state aid, intellectual property. Aims to harmonize regulatory frameworks with EU acquis. Includes a dispute settlement mechanism (undergoing reform). Provides platforms/databases for trade info (TBT, SPS, MAB).</p> <p><b>Green Transition:</b> No explicit environmental or sustainability standards integrated into the core agreement structure or protocols based on available information. Focus is primarily economic/trade liberalization.</p> <p><b>Effectiveness:</b> Key instrument for facilitating intra-regional trade and preparing WB economies for EU Single Market pressures. Contributes significantly to the Common Regional Market agenda.</p> <p><b>Challenges:</b> Implementation of agreements can be uneven. Dispute settlement mechanism needed reform. Lack of explicit green dimension means environmental considerations in trade rely on national regulations or alignment driven by other frameworks (GAWB, Energy Community).</p> <p><b>Contributions:</b> Provides a crucial framework for regional economic integration, reducing trade barriers, and promoting regulatory alignment with the EU in trade-related areas.</p>
<p><b>Energy Community</b> (Regulatory)</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> International organisation bringing EU and neighbours (incl. WB6) together to create an integrated energy market based on EU rules.</p> <p><b>Governance:</b> Establishes legally binding framework requiring adoption/implementation of EU energy acquis; includes monitoring, dispute settlement, and institutional structures (Ministerial Council, Secretariat).</p> <p><b>Green Transition:</b> Core mandate covers implementation of EU acquis related to electricity, gas, security of supply, renewables, energy efficiency, environment (EIA, SEA, industrial emissions), climate (ETS, Governance Regulation), infrastructure (TEN-E). Adopted 2030 energy/climate targets for the Community aligned with EU Green Deal. Promotes just transition.</p> <p><b>Effectiveness:</b> Key driver for legal and regulatory reform in the WB energy sectors, pushing alignment with EU standards necessary for market integration and green transition. Legally binding nature provides strong incentive for adoption of acquis.</p>

	<p><b>Challenges:</b> Implementation and enforcement of adopted acquis remain significant challenges across WB, often due to lack of capacity, political interference, or conflicting national priorities (e.g., coal dependency). Ensuring a truly 'just' transition requires careful management.</p> <p><b>Contributions:</b> Provides the primary legal and regulatory pathway for WB energy sector integration with the EU and for advancing the energy/climate aspects of the green transition based on established EU rules.</p>
<p><b>Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the Western Balkans</b> (EU Funding Strategy)</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> EU strategy (2020) aiming to spur long-term economic recovery, support green/digital transition, foster regional integration and convergence with EU. Mobilises up to €9bn EU grants and aims to leverage up to €20bn investments via guarantees.</p> <p><b>Governance:</b> Explicitly links financial support to fundamental reforms, particularly rule of law, anti-corruption, public administration, good governance, democratic institutions. Supports CRM.</p> <p><b>Green Transition:</b> Central pillar. Funds 10 investment flagships heavily focused on green transition: sustainable transport, clean energy (renewables, coal transition), environment (waste/water management), building renovation (energy efficiency). Directly supports GAWB implementation.</p> <p><b>Effectiveness:</b> Represents the EU's main financial commitment to the region's development and transition. Has potential for significant impact through large-scale investments, particularly in green infrastructure.</p> <p><b>Challenges:</b> Success heavily depends on WB partners meeting governance reform conditions. Absorption capacity for large funds can be limited by administrative weaknesses. Risk of projects exacerbating governance issues (e.g., corruption in procurement) if safeguards are weak. Ensuring investments are truly sustainable and benefit local communities requires careful planning and monitoring.</p> <p><b>Contributions:</b> Provides substantial financial firepower for WB convergence and green/digital transitions. Strong political signal of EU commitment. Drives investment priorities in line with EU goals.</p>
<p><b>Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF)</b> (EU Funding Mechanism)</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> Joint initiative of EU, International Financial Institutions (IFIs), bilateral donors, and WB beneficiaries. Main vehicle for implementing the EIP. Blends EU grants (IPA) with loans from IFIs (EIB, EBRD, WB etc.) and contributions from bilateral donors to finance strategic investments, primarily infrastructure, and provide technical assistance. <b>Governance:</b> Supports EIP's link between investment and reforms. Project preparation/implementation involves adherence to IFI/EU standards, potentially improving project governance. Supports private sector development which can foster better business environment.</p> <p><b>Green Transition:</b> Implements EIP flagships focused on sustainable transport, clean energy, environment/climate. Supports specific green programmes (e.g., REEP for energy efficiency, WB EDIF for green SMEs). Guarantee facility aims to de-risk green investments.</p> <p><b>Effectiveness:</b> Proven mechanism for leveraging finance and coordinating donors for large investments. Facilitates preparation and implementation of complex infrastructure projects identified under EIP/Connectivity Agenda.</p> <p><b>Challenges:</b> Dominated by large infrastructure projects, potentially underfunding 'soft' measures or smaller-scale green initiatives. Project selection and implementation transparency can be concerns. Ensuring alignment with environmental/social standards requires robust oversight.</p> <p><b>Contributions:</b> Key operational tool for EIP delivery, enabling major investments in connectivity and green transition infrastructure. Facilitates donor coordination ('Team Europe' approach)</p>
<b><i>Transnational project-based collaboration</i></b>	
<p><b>EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR)</b></p>	<p><b>Description:</b> The EUSAIR (2019) is a macroregional strategy promoting cooperation across the region. It addresses shared challenges in blue growth, environmental quality, tourism, and connectivity, aiming to foster sustainable development, EU integration, and regional territorial cohesion.</p>

<p>Project-Based (Macro-Regional Strategy)</p>	<p><b>Governance:</b> EUSAIR is governed through a multi-level coordination system led by a Governing Board and supported by Thematic Steering Groups and the Facility Point. Each of the four pillars is co-led by one EU and one non-EU country, promoting joint ownership. While inclusive governance encourages cooperation, institutional asymmetries and limited political mainstreaming persist.</p> <p><b>Green Transition:</b> The strategy supports the green transition, especially through its Environmental Quality pillar. Priorities include marine ecosystem protection, pollution control, and climate adaptation. EUSAIR fosters cross-border initiatives aligned with EU climate goals, though implementation depends on national systems and remains uneven across the region.</p> <p><b>Effectiveness:</b> EUSAIR has improved policy dialogue, cooperation culture, and joint project development in a complex geopolitical context. It helps align national priorities and supports EU accession efforts. However, its impact is limited by the absence of dedicated funding, low national visibility, and weak integration into domestic policies.</p> <p><b>Challenges:</b> Major challenges include capacity gaps between EU and non-EU countries, a lack of dedicated funding, and variable political commitment. Complex governance and limited regulatory convergence also hinder strategic implementation and long-term impact.</p> <p><b>Contributions:</b> EUSAIR enhances macroregional cooperation, facilitates EU-WBs integration, and supports green and territorial agendas. It provides a platform for transnational coordination, stakeholder engagement, and policy innovation, contributing to a shared Adriatic-Ionian identity and functional regional cooperation.</p>
<p><b>EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)</b> Project-Based (Macro-Regional Strategy)</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> The EUSDR, adopted in 2011, is a macroregional framework involving several countries spanning from Germany to the Black Sea. It promotes coordinated action across a diverse region through four pillars: connectivity, environment, prosperity, and governance.</p> <p><b>Governance:</b> EUSDR features a coordinated, multi-level governance structure, with National Coordinators, Priority Area Coordinators (PACS), and a High-Level Group at the EU level. Its 12 Priority Areas are co-led by country pairs and operationalised through Steering Groups. Governance is decentralised but uneven, with progress depending on national engagement and administrative capacity.</p> <p><b>Green Transition:</b> The green transition is central, particularly in Priority Areas on water quality, biodiversity, disaster risk, and sustainable energy. EUSDR promotes integrated river basin management in line with the EU Water Framework and Floods Directives, and supports renewable energy and energy efficiency. Despite achievements in knowledge exchange and pilot actions, gaps remain in the implementation and financing of green infrastructure.</p> <p><b>Effectiveness:</b> EUSDR has become a driver of transnational project generation, especially under Interreg and other EU programs. It has improved cross-border cooperation, policy alignment, and stakeholder networking. Its effectiveness is strongest in areas with existing cooperation traditions (e.g. water management) but weaker in areas requiring high political consensus or legal harmonisation.</p> <p><b>Challenges:</b> EUSDR faces institutional asymmetry, funding fragmentation, and limited binding power. Varying levels of political commitment and administrative capacity across countries affect coherence and speed of implementation. The strategy's non-binding nature often leads to a gap between strategic planning and operational impact.</p> <p><b>Contributions:</b> EUSDR contributes to European territorial integration by fostering cross-border dialogue, capacity-building, and project partnerships. It supports EU enlargement and neighbourhood policies, especially in the WB and Eastern Partnership countries. As a project-based strategy, its main strength lies in enabling functional cooperation and joint solutions to shared challenges, particularly in environmental and infrastructural fields.</p>
<p><b>Interreg Programmes (IPA)</b></p>	<p>Interreg Programmes, such as IPA ADRION and Danube, are EU funding instruments that support cross-border and transnational cooperation, involving WB</p>

<b>ADRION, Danube, NEXT MED, etc.)</b> Project-Based (Cross-Border/Transnational Cooperation)	countries alongside EU regions. These programmes explicitly target both governance improvements, like enhancing institutional capacity and supporting EUSAIR governance, and the green transition, funding numerous projects focused on climate action, clean energy, circular economy, biodiversity, and sustainable mobility. While effective in delivering concrete, often smaller-scale projects and fostering valuable networks, challenges include ensuring the sustainability and scalability of results beyond the project lifespan.
<b>ESPON (European Spatial Planning Observation Network) - Research</b> Project-Based (Research/Network)	ESPON is an EU research programme providing evidence on territorial development trends to inform policy-making. Although WB countries are not formal members, they are included in specific ESPON research projects. This research offers valuable comparative insights, identifying WB spatial governance systems and highlighting challenges related to state control, potential corruption, and informality, which are relevant to both governance and environmental outcomes. While ESPON's territorial analysis links to environmental sustainability, its influence depends on policy uptake, and the lack of formal WB membership limits direct regional participation.
<b>EU Horizon Europe</b> Project-Based (EU Research Programme)	Horizon Europe is the EU's key funding programme for research and innovation, tackling climate change, helps to achieve the UN's SDGs and boosts the EU's competitiveness and growth. The programme facilitates collaboration and strengthens the impact of research and innovation in developing, supporting and implementing EU policies while tackling global challenges. It supports creating and better dispersing of excellent knowledge and technologies. Horizon Europe funds research and knowledge exchange projects across WB and EU countries e.g., GreenFORCE project – one channel to fuel knowledge exchange on more specific issues, re. green transitions, planning, governance, etc.
<b>EUKI (European Climate Initiative)</b> Project-Based (EU Climate Initiative)	EUKI is a funding instrument from the German Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK), implemented by GIZ, financing cross-border climate action projects in EU Member States and WB candidate countries. It supports projects across various climate topics, including policy development, energy transition, just transition, and sustainable mobility, focusing on practical solutions, capacity building, and network creation. EUKI fosters collaboration between partners, often supporting innovative, CSO-led initiatives, and contributes to implementing EU climate goals like the Green Deal and Fit for 55. While effective in building a community of climate practitioners, the impact of its typically smaller-scale, time-bound projects depends on scalability and integration into national policies.
<b>UNDP (United Nations Development Programme)</b> Project-Based (UN Agency)	UNDP works in about 170 countries and territories, helping to eradicate poverty, reduce inequalities and exclusion, and build resilience so countries can sustain progress. As the UN's development agency, UNDP plays a critical role in helping countries achieve the SDGs. UNDP connects countries with the knowledge, resources and networks they need to achieve development breakthroughs.
<b>National development funds (bilateral co-operation)</b> Project-Based (Bilateral Agency)	Bilateral development funds, such as Germany's GIZ, Sweden's Sida, and Swiss Cooperation (SDC/SECO), operate as key project-based partners in the WBs, implementing technical cooperation and funding initiatives aligned with their national priorities. Collectively, these agencies provide targeted technical assistance and project funding that contribute to advancing both governance reforms and green transition objectives across the region. GIZ is recognized for its technical expertise and capacity building, with a strong focus on energy transition, climate adaptation, and supporting local governance. Sida prioritises democracy, human rights, and rule of law, alongside significant support for environment and climate goals, frequently channelling funds through partners including IFIs and CSOs. Swiss Cooperation traditionally supports local governance and economic development and is actively working to integrate the GAWB into its portfolio, particularly focusing on water, environment, and economy sectors.
<b><i>Transnational bottom-up collaboration</i></b>	

<p><b>Network of Associations of Local Authorities of Southeast Europe (NALAS)</b></p>	<p><b>Description:</b> Network of 13 national associations of local authorities from SEE, including WB6. Aims to promote decentralisation, local self-government, and improve local services.</p> <p><b>Governance:</b> Core focus on strengthening local governance capacity, promoting decentralization reforms, advocating for local government interests, facilitating knowledge exchange (Task Forces, Quick Response/Shadowing), monitoring local finance (Decentralization Observatory, Statistical Briefs). Cooperates with CoE, GIZ.</p> <p><b>Green Transition:</b> Task Forces cover relevant areas like energy efficiency, waste management, water management. Engages in climate change discussions at local level. Promotes sustainable local communities.</p> <p><b>Effectiveness:</b> Important platform for peer learning and capacity building among local government associations in the region. Provides valuable data and analysis on local finance and decentralisation. Advocates effectively for local government interests at regional/national levels.</p> <p><b>Challenges:</b> Relies on member association engagement and capacity. Influence on national decentralisation policies varies across countries. Needs sustainable funding for its secretariat and activities. Addressing complex green transition challenges at local level requires significant capacity building.</p> <p><b>Contributions:</b> Key actor strengthening local democracy and governance capacity across SEE/WB. Provides crucial data and advocacy for fiscal decentralisation. Facilitates sharing of best practices in local service delivery, including environmental services.</p>
<p><b>Western Balkan Network on Territorial Governance (TG-WeB)</b></p>	<p><b>Description:</b> TG-WeB is a voluntary platform established in 2018. It unites researchers, civil society organisations, and academic institutions from the WBs and EU member states. TG-WeB aims to enhance territorial governance practices in the WBs, aligning them with EU standards and facilitating the region's integration into EU frameworks.</p> <p><b>Governance:</b> TG-WeB operates through a decentralised, bottom-up approach. It is coordinated by member organisations across the WBs and the EU, without a formal institutional hierarchy. The network conducts annual workshops, publishes the Annual Review of Territorial Governance in the WBs, and advocates policy. Its governance model emphasises inclusivity, collaboration, and the co-creation of knowledge among diverse stakeholders.</p> <p><b>Green Transition:</b> TG-WeB actively promotes the green transition in the WBs by integrating Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) into national and sub-national policies. The network focuses on sustainable spatial planning, climate change adaptation, and ecosystem-based governance. Through workshops and publications, TG-WeB encourages the adoption of green infrastructure and renewable energy solutions, aligning regional practices with the EU's Green Deal objectives.</p> <p><b>Effectiveness:</b> Despite several attempts, TG-WeB has scarce influence on setting the policy discourse in the WBs. It has contributed to disseminating best practices in territorial governance and fostered cross-border collaborations. The network's publications and workshops have provided platforms for knowledge exchange, although the translation of these insights into concrete policy changes has not proven.</p> <p><b>Challenges:</b> TG-WeB faces institutional fragmentation, limited funding, and political instability across the WBs. Capacity gaps, lack of dedicated resources, and poor data availability constrain its influence and operational reach, despite strong commitment and regional relevance.</p> <p><b>Contributions:</b> TG-WeB builds capacity, fosters policy dialogue, and promotes knowledge sharing on territorial governance. It strengthens regional cooperation, aligns practices with EU standards, and supports the EU integration process by connecting stakeholders and shaping policy through research, advocacy, and cross-border exchange.</p>

<p><b>Open Society Foundations - Western Balkans (OSF-WB)</b> Bottom-Up (Foundation)</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> Part of the global Open Society Foundations network, supporting civil society, democracy, human rights, and social justice in the WB.</p> <p><b>Governance:</b> Funds projects promoting democracy, participation, transparency, accountability, rule of law, EU integration. Supports regional cooperation initiatives, CSOs, independent media. Specific projects on monitoring EU convergence (Convergezeu), state aid transparency, keeping WB on transatlantic agenda (Balkans Forward).</p> <p><b>Green Transition:</b> Supports specific initiatives like the 'Sunny Schools Initiative' promoting sustainable energy in schools/communities. Engages in energy forums.</p> <p><b>Effectiveness:</b> For many years a key supporter of independent civil society and media in the region, often funding critical voices and initiatives promoting transparency and accountability. Due to the flexibility of funding could respond to emerging needs.</p> <p><b>Challenges:</b> Impact has been recently affected by shrinking civic space or government pressure in some countries. Funding priorities may shift based on foundation's global strategy. Scale of funding smaller than major public donors.</p> <p><b>Contributions:</b> Important source of funding and support for civil society, democracy promotion, and critical analysis in the WB especially during 2000-2015. Continues to support projects and regional networking, within the framework of IGNITA Initiative.</p>
<p><b>CEE Bankwatch Network</b> Bottom-Up (CSO Network)</p>	<p><b>Description:</b> International network of CSOs monitoring public finance (IFIs, EU funds) in Central/Eastern Europe, including WB.</p> <p><b>Governance:</b> Advocates for transparency, public participation, accountability in decision-making related to public investments. Monitors compliance with environmental/social standards and safeguards. Engages with EU institutions/IFIs.</p> <p><b>Green Transition:</b> Focuses on preventing harmful energy/infrastructure projects (coal, fossil gas, damaging hydro), promoting energy efficiency, renewables, just transition. Monitors environmental impacts (e.g., air pollution from coal plants), compliance with EU environmental law (e.g., LCPD, DNSH).</p> <p><b>Effectiveness:</b> Provides crucial independent scrutiny of large investments and their impacts. Raises awareness and mobilizes public/policy pressure against harmful projects. Contributes expertise on environmental/social standards and just transition.</p> <p><b>Challenges:</b> Relies on donor funding (e.g., Sida, ECF). Access to information can be difficult. Influence depends on responsiveness of institutions and governments. Faces powerful vested interests in energy/infrastructure sectors.</p> <p><b>Contributions:</b> Essential watchdog role, holding IFIs, EU, and governments accountable for environmental/social performance of investments. Provides critical analysis and advocacy for sustainable alternatives and just transition in WB.</p>
<p><b>Other project-based CSOs' networks in the WB</b></p>	<p>Diverse CSO networks are actively engaged in the GAWB, specializing in areas like civil society in general (e.g., BCSDN), environmental monitoring (e.g., CEE Bankwatch), research (e.g., TG-WeB, GreenFORCE), capacity building (e.g., ENV.net, REC), local governance (NALAS), and journalism (EJN). These networks play crucial roles in implementing the GAWB and supporting EU integration through monitoring, advocacy, research, and capacity building. Despite their importance, they face significant challenges, including unstable donor-dependent funding, shrinking civic space, limited institutional capacity, and difficulties ensuring effective policy implementation. While the EU is the primary funder and driver of the green agenda, there are concerns about the need for stronger linkage between funding and progress on fundamental governance reforms and civic space protection. Effectively integrating the social equity dimensions of a 'Just Transition' alongside environmental goals also represents an emerging challenge for these networks.</p>

#### **4. Macroregional collaboration in the Western Balkans under the Green Agenda Theme**

There are several transnational frameworks involving WB countries that focus on promoting macroregional collaboration and cohesion under green agenda themes. WB countries, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia are contracting members of The Energy Community, an international organisation which brings together the European Union and its neighbours to create an integrated pan-European energy market by extending EU internal energy market rules and principles to countries in South East Europe. A core objective of the community is to improve the environmental quality of energy supplies in contracting countries by fostering the use of renewable energies and energy efficiency. This includes promoting the Just Transition Initiative to ensure that the move away from fossil fuels in contracting countries is socially just, and in the interests of women, workers, and communities. The Regional Rural Standing Working Group in South East Europe, involves Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. The working group is an international platform promoting transnational dialogue, networking, and projects aiming to empower and promote sustainable principles on rural development, with a focus on environmental protection. Serbia is also a member of the Carpathian Convention which is a transnational collaboration framework for developing and implementing transnational strategies, programmes, and projects for sustainable development and protecting nature and biodiversity.

The RCC promote macroregional collaboration under climate and environmental themes. Both the South Eastern Europe 2030 Strategy and Common Regional Market Action Plan have a climate and environmental component, identifying green taxonomy and green innovation as essential for regional development and growth. WB countries are also work together on macroregional environmental topics as members of the Regional Working Group on Environment (RWG Env) and Biodiversity Task Force (BD TF), established under the RCC. The RWG Env represents an intergovernmental platform aimed at coordinating important regional initiatives and projects in the area of environment and climate change. The RWG Env coordinates activities related to the main three areas, the protection of biodiversity, climate proofing of transport infrastructure, and water-energy-food-ecosystem development, in addition to supporting the development and implementation of the GAWB. RWG Env is an intergovernmental platform with meetings twice a year. RCC acts as a secretariat and co-chair. Co-chairing also rotates among participants. The group involves policy makers up to the ministers in charge of environment and climate change, as well as representatives of international organisations, projects, environmental agencies and other regional and EU stakeholders. The work contributes to the GAWB. The BD TF also meets twice a year and works to identify regional priorities for biodiversity conservation and joint activities. The task force is established under RWG Env and consists of technical experts. It serves mainly an advisory role on mainstreaming biodiversity issues into environmental policy.

In February 2024, RCC launched the Western Balkans Green and Circular Economy Stakeholders Platform. The platform brings together government, businesses, donors and international financial institutions, and civil society organisations. Ministers and policymakers were part of high-level panel at the launch event, demonstrating joint commitment and interest to advance on the green agenda implementation and transition to a circular economy. The platform will also foster regional learning and knowledge exchange, aiming to catalyse green investments and funding opportunities.

##### *European Project-based Collaboration*

Most WB countries participate in green-based macroregional collaboration activities as part of core EU Cohesion Policy pillars, including Interreg programmes (e.g. Interreg Euro-MED; Interreg IPA Adriatic-Ionian; Interreg Danube; and Interreg Balkan-Mediterranean) and macroregional strategies for the Adriatic-Ionian and Danube regions. One of EU Cohesion Policies core objectives is to support the implementation of the EGD. Working towards a Greener Europe is one of the key Cohesion Policy priorities in the 2021-2027 programming period and, as such, is addressed by Interreg programmes and EU macroregional strategies. The macroregional strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region support transnational project development under the climate themes

environmental quality, while the Danube macroregional strategy climate priority themes are sustainable energy, water Quality, and biodiversity, landscapes, and air and soil quality. The Balkan-MED Interreg programme identified strengths in building on natural and cultural assets and potential to contribute to competitiveness and innovation, and sought to leverage opportunities in enhancing SMEs' engagement, employment mobility, and renewable energy, as well as building on EU initiatives to promote sustainable transport. This programme has promoted activities such as meetings and workshops focused on thematic exchanges on environmental issues, biodiversity, environmental legislation. Interreg Euro-MED supports transnational projects, initiatives and policies related to climate change and the environment under topics promoting green living and protecting, restoring and valorising the natural environment and heritage. The Interreg IPA Adriatic-Ionian Programme invests in transnational projects under a core theme supporting a green and climate resilient region, focuses on climate adaptation, circular economy, nature and biodiversity preservation, and sustainable transport systems. The Interreg Danube Programme has supports transnational projects under the theme a greener and low-carbon Danube Region, specifically targeting sustainable transport, renewable energy, water quality, and nature and biodiversity protection.

Networks and collaboration can also be linked to funding mechanisms or institutions. For instance, the European Climate Initiative (EUKI), funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, supports initiatives and projects in the EU member states and, in the WB to improve climate cooperation. EUKI's 2023 Western Balkans Networking Conference was hosted in Albania and brought together practitioners and policymakers from the Balkan countries and EU member states. The event also aimed to foster mutual learning and dialogue between civil society and local and national policy makers on the green agenda implementation.

#### *Bottom-up and local level collaboration*

At the level of local authorities, NALAS is working also in the field of green transition. The green agenda and resilience are among the key thematic areas of the association. The objectives include contributing to implementation of the GAWB and making cities more resilient. NALAS cooperates for instance with the Covenant of Mayors and has established a helpdesk the framework of the "EU4 Energy Transition: Covenant of Mayors in the Western Balkans and Türkiye". The EU4 energy Transition actions of the Covenant of Mayors targets WB countries, but local authorities from all Balkan countries are also among the signatories of the Covenant of Mayors Initiative. The focus is on tackling climate change through mitigation and adaptation, as well as addressing energy poverty, most notably by developing sustainable energy and climate action plans (SECAPs) aligned with the EUs climate and energy policy targets. Through the initiative, the local authorities from WB have access to a multi-level governance exchange platform reaching also beyond the region.

In terms of civil society engagement, the latest Civil Society Forum of the Western Balkans (CSF WB) agenda in 2023 tackled energy, climate and green agenda issues through dedicated working groups. Thematic Working Group (TWG) Energy sought to find solutions for a sustainable, just, and ambitious energy transition and address issues of decarbonisation, energy source diversification and financing. TWG Climate Change and Green Agenda focused on green infrastructure investments, governance and legislation, and protection of natural resources and biodiversity.

Another relevant entity is the Balkan Green Foundation (BGF), which promotes inclusive, equitable and sustainable development across the Balkans. BGF works closely with partner organisations from different sectors and international donors to implement regional initiatives contributing to regional sustainability in key sectors such as energy, environment, and economy. In addition, CEE Bankwatch is a network of organizations throughout CEE region, with branch office in North Macedonia of the WB countries. The CEE Bankwatch Network connects grassroots environmental and human rights groups. The Network monitors the spending of public finances, and they have been critical of the GAWB implementation process. It is an active and relevant stakeholder in advocating for alterations and monitoring the GAWB and the AP.

## *The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans*

The RCC coordinated the development of the GAWB which is the flagship strategy for promoting macroregional collaboration and cohesion in the WBs under climate and environmental policies. The idea for a GAWB was endorsed during the Western Balkans Sofia Summit in 2020. Building on dialogue between WB national authorities and the EU and signed by the WB countries' leaders in 2020, the Sofia Declaration outlined a commitment to addressing key climate and environmental challenges in the WB region in alignment with the policy priorities of the EGD (RCC 2020; RCC 2020). The Sofia Declaration gave the RCC the mandate to coordinate the preparation of the GAWB Action Plan (RCC 2020). The GAWB Action Plan was adopted at the Brdo Summit in 2021.

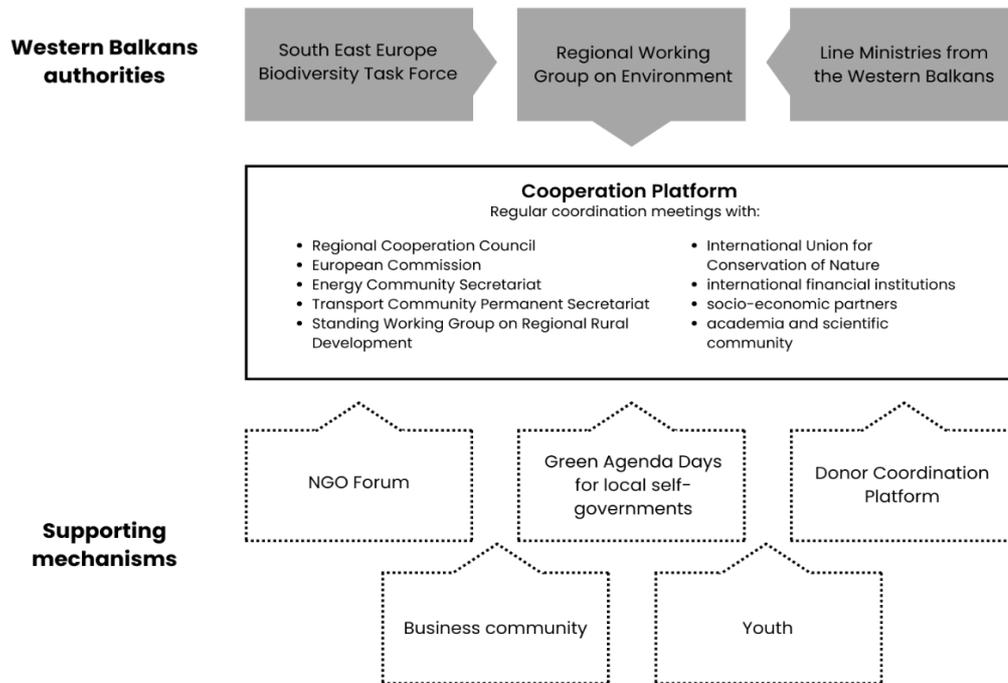
The GAWB Action Plan demonstrates a political commitment to work towards adopting EU environmental and climate standards and regulations. The Action Plan is aligned with the European Green Deal's key priorities across five interconnected pillars: (1) climate, energy and mobility, (2) circular economy, (3) depollution, (4) sustainable agriculture and food production, and (5) biodiversity (RCC 2020). The main themes cover a number of sub-themes (outlined in Table 2) and a cross-cutting theme of digitalisation further reinforces the alignment between green and digital transitions (Berisha 2025). The joint framework seeks to enable coordinated action for WB countries to adopt EU standards while adapting to local contexts. The efforts are also motivated by access to funding and advancing the pre-accession dialogue and the EU accession process.

*Table 2. Core themes and sub-themes of the GAWB*

<b>Main Theme</b>	<b>Sub Themes</b>
<b>Clean Energy and Climate Protection</b>	<i>Climate Change (e.g. climate laws/targets and building climate resilience)</i>
	<i>Clean Energy Transitions (e.g. renewable energies, energy efficiency in homes/buildings, industrial/business transition to clean energy processes)</i>
	<i>Smart and Sustainable Transport</i>
<b>Circular Economy</b>	<i>Recycling, Waste and Plastics</i>
	<i>Resources, production, and innovation</i>
<b>Depollution</b>	<i>Air</i>
	<i>Soil</i>
	<i>Water</i>
<b>Building Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems</b>	<i>Sustainable Food Systems</i>
	<i>Developing Rural Areas</i>
<b>Protecting Biodiversity and Ecosystems</b>	<i>Protecting Habitats, ecosystems, and species (e.g. protected areas, forest restoration, lakes etc.)</i>

The GAWB Action Plan outlines a multi-level, multi-actor governance implementation structure based on vertical coordination and strong cross-sectoral collaboration: 'concerted action is necessary to ensure regional ownership and cooperation, a multi-stakeholder approach, a cross-sectoral collaboration through the involvement of all relevant WB authorities, as well as strengthening cooperation at different levels' (RCC 2021). As outlined in Figure 1, this multi-actor approach involves relevant regional organisations that have activities or mandates in relevant policy areas in the WB region (such as the Energy Community Secretariat (EnCS), Transport Community Permanent Secretariat (TCPS), Standing Working Group on Regional Rural Development (SWG RRD), International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), etc.), international financial institutions, various socio-economic partners, non-governmental organisations, academia and the scientific community (RCC 2021).

Figure 1. The GAWB Governance Model (adapted from RCC 2021, p. 32)



To make this multi-actor approach possible, the RCC established fora to engage a diverse range of actors in dialogue and implementation, including the NGO Forum and the Green Agenda Days (GAD), to provide a platform for bottom-up consultation and establish a dialogue with local self-governments (LSG). The GAWB Action Plan translates broad policy goals into a series of policy actions to guide implementation. The GAWB is operationalised through an Action Plan, structured around the five key pillars, 58 actions and seven thematic roadmaps that specify strategic objectives and implementation measures (RCC 2021). The actions range from aligning with EU regulation and standards (e.g. Climate Law, Industrial Emissions Directive, water-related acquis, ETS), setting forward-looking targets and developing plans, strategies and new legislation, as well as various other initiatives and sector-specific measures. The list of actions is complemented by indicators to monitor progress and implementation. The Action Plan is intended to provide annual assessments of the implementation process and ensure alignment with overarching goals. The EU4Green project supports the WBs in implementing the GAWB. The Swiss Bank and World Bank have also provided funds for green development infrastructure projects linked to GAWB themes.

The GAWB Action Plan supports EU accession processes by attempting to build policy links and cohesion between WB countries under key green agenda policy sub-themes closely aligned with the EU Green Deal and other EU climate targets. The GAWB reflects a novel attempt at macroregional collaboration building in the WBs for several reasons. Firstly, it represents a transnational collaborative effort that focuses solely on identifying green agenda policy synergies between WB countries without the involvement of other Eastern European states. Secondly, it promotes collective action in policies areas where transnational collaboration between WB countries is extremely rare. Thirdly, the processes and structures at the heart of the GAWB are very similar to those associated with the EU Macroregional model.

The GAWB process appears to follow an experimentalist macroregional governance logic. First, the overarching green agenda theme, and several of the corresponding sub-themes, are still in their relative infancy, meaning there are high levels of uncertainty, volatility, and a lack of knowledge on different climate and environment related topics. This context creates a need for experimentalist governance approaches based on multi-actor deliberative dialogue in which participants can share knowledge and learn from each other's experiences in the preparation of new policy frameworks. Second, the GAWB process appears to follow the iterative cycle of the

four key experimentalist governance dimensions. The GAWB has an underlying experimentalist governance logic based on the preparation of a broad overarching strategic narrative, complemented by measurable indicators used as a framework for implementation and monitoring. Furthermore, actors have provided reports on the implementation of the GAWB and a re-evaluation of the GAWB that is due to take place. Thirdly, the GAWB also respects the 3 no's logic behind EU macro-regional strategies which are closely associated with experimentalist governance approaches. There were no new institutions created to guide the development of the GAWB. The overarching GAWB framework and Action Plan were created within existing institutional structures. The process was coordinated by the RCC working in collaboration with national authorities from WB countries, regional organisations active in policy areas covered by the GAWB, international financial institutions (IFIs), and CSOs, with the support of the European Commission (EC), Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). The GAWB resulted in no additional costs as it was financially supported through existing EU funds including the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPAIII), the Western Balkans Investment Framework, and the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+). Finally, the GAWB gave rise to no specific or binding EU legislation for the WB region. On the surface, therefore, the GAWB, appears an example of experimentalist macroregional governance and collaboration building in the making. The following section provides a more detailed overview and assessment of the GAWB Action Plan development and implementation process.

## **5. Assessment of GAWB Action Plan Development and Implementation Process**

Academic and policy literature identifies multiple challenges in the development and implementation of the GAWB Action Plan, including weak regulatory frameworks, limited institutional capacities, fragmented governance and cross-sector structures, the predominance of energy intensive industries (Ignjatović et al 2024), in addition to financial constraints (Aspen Institute 2022), and limited citizen and stakeholder awareness and engagement (JRC 2024). Further challenges have been discovered through stakeholder interviews conducted as part of the GreenFORCE project. This section of the report highlights these additional challenges identified by stakeholders involved in the GAWB Action Plan process, including RCC representatives, ministries, academics and representatives from local authorities, businesses, NGOs and societal groups. Results have been anonymised in respect of the integrity of participants involved and to ensure an honest and transparent representation of the identified challenges. The assessment is split into GAWB Action Plan formulation and implementation challenges as outlined below:

### **GAWB Formulation Challenges**

- **National level focus:** The dominant role of national-level actors in the GAWB Action Plan development process meant that discussions were largely driven by each country's own individual climate and environmental interests. Interviewees described the overall GAWB Action Plan goals as overly broad and a lowest common denominator list that could be adapted to suit the needs of different national government actors.
- **Weak transnational dimension:** The strong national level focus of the discussion surrounding the preparation of the GAWB Action Plan resulted in goals that did not adequately reflect and consider the transnational dimension. The limited transnational element has restricted the potential for genuine cross-border collaboration in the design and implementation of GAWB Action Plan activities and initiatives.
- **Lack of capacities:** The effective development and coordination of the GAWB Action Plan requires many capacities, ranging from financial resources, staffing, and specific knowledge and skills related to core themes. These capacities are generally scarce amongst the key stakeholders involved in the GAWB Action Plan development and implementation process. In its role as Action Plan coordinator, the RCC is drastically understaffed, which places restrictions on their ability to conduct thorough

stakeholder engagement processes. Interviewees also revealed that the RCC, as well as national authorities and other key stakeholders involved in the process (i.e. CSOs), lacked the knowledge and technical expertise on key GAWB Action Plan themes. Limited financial resources often prevents key stakeholders from participating in consultations or in more continuous dialogue throughout the process to allow meaningful exchange and influence over the content of the Action Plan. Limited capacities is, therefore, a two-way problem for both the quality of the process and the end result.

- A top-down process: Several interviewees felt that the GAWB Action Plan development process was a top-down and exclusive exercise, with participation mostly limited to national level actors. Interviewees noted that 'the GAWB has been developed in a top-down fashion', 'drafted in the dark', without a 'genuine effort of creating dialogue'.
- Limited consultation and insufficient communication: Interviewees noted that plans were brought to stakeholders for ratification and approval without sufficient time allocated for meaningful consultation and deliberation. Interviewees commented that they had limited knowledge and awareness of the GAWB development process and what their role could be in its formulation. This indicates that there was a lack of communication and transparency in the overall development process due to the limited availability of information for interested stakeholders. One interviewee noted that the whole GAWB Action Plan process was unclear from the start with stakeholders and citizens not informed about the aims and implications.
- Underrepresentation of key stakeholders & place-blindness: CSOs and regional/local authorities were highlighted by interviewees as key stakeholder groups who had limited access and involvement in GAWB Action Plan preparation. Their reduced involvement meant that the final GAWB Action Plan did not address regional and local challenges/opportunities or the needs of citizens and communities. The NGO Forum created to support the development and implementation of the GAWB Action Plan was viewed as being particularly ineffective at the policy formulation stage. Some interviewees expressed the view that certain CSOs were cherry picked to provide comments on the document, but even these bodies were given a very limited time period – "two weeks" - to provide feedback. However, there was an acknowledgement from CSO representatives that they lack sufficient capacity and resources to be able to participate in transnational policy formulation efforts like the GAWB Action Plan development process.
- Politicised rather than evidence-based process: Interviewees argued that the selection of GAWB themes was driven by national level political priorities, or predetermined by EU level Green Deal objectives, rather than guided by evidence-based information and data from the WB context. Interviewees noted that there was a limited role for independent experts, universities and other knowledge institutes to provide essential data on which to build GAWB Action Plan themes and action, including vital up-to-date socio-economic and environmental impact assessments.

### *Implementation Challenges*

- Weak governance model and a lack of direction: Interviewees noted that one of the main challenges for GAWB Action Plan implementation related to the allocation and clarity of roles and responsibilities of different actors within the overall GAWB Action Plan governance model. The governance model was criticized for not outlining clearly the roles and responsibilities of different actors in the implementation process. It was also suggested that there was a lack of overall direction and clear practical advice on how individual GAWB Action Plan goals and targets could be implemented effectively. Interviewees pointed out that the priorities, roles, resources, and responsibilities for GAWB Action Plan objectives remain vague.
- Limited RCC mandate: Interviewees noted that RCC are good at organizing and facilitating discussions between national level actors, but they do not have the mandate to implement the GAWB, which must

be done nationally. As the RCC do not have a mandate to enforce GAWB goals, WB countries are not obliged to implement all GAWB actions and can cherry pick goals they wish to follow based on their own national interests.

- National level control: There is a high degree of national level political control over GAWB implementation and financing. The GAWB is being implemented mainly via big national level infrastructure projects funded by Western Balkan Investment Fund under the new EU Growth Plan for the WBs. These projects are driven by national ministries with limited to no consultation of wider stakeholders beyond large scale industries. As a result, national authorities can cherry pick GAWB Action Plan goals they wish to follow based on their own national interests.
- Lack of transnational/cross-border perspective: Not many GAWB Action Plan projects focus on building transnational and cross-border collaboration, dialogue, and knowledge sharing between different WB countries as the projects are primarily focused on the national level. Interviewees noted that there are no transnational or cross-border elements outlined in the implementation of the GAWB Action Plan. The implementation of the GAWB Action Plan is not a collaborative transnational or cross-border process but based on an assessment of what suits an individual country in terms of themes, targets, and indicators.
- Dominant sectoral actors and lack of consultation with broader economic sectors: Large national level industrial sectors and the energy community are the main drivers when it comes to the implementation of the GAWB. Close links between national governments and large industrial sectors means that other stakeholder groups are neglected or ignored when it comes to the allocations of GAWB Action Plan projects and funding.
- Governance fragmentation with limited role for sub-national level: The centralization of policymaking across the WBs leads to fragmented governance structures characterized by a limited role for sub-national level institutions and actors in GAWB Action Plan implementation. Interviewees noted that regional and local authorities have not been invited to participate in the Action Plan implementation process by national ministries. They indicated that regions and local authorities need to find ways to enhance their involvement in GAWB Action Plan projects determined at the national level.
- Limited public-private sector collaboration: Interviews revealed that essential public-private collaborations have not been established to facilitate the implementation of the GAWB Action Plan. This is partly explained by the dominant focus on the challenges that emerge from transforming, predominantly industrial sectors, and managing the negative consequences, and somewhat missing focus on the emerging opportunities. Interviewees pointed out that the limited role of sub-national level actors and CSOs at the GAWB Action Plan formulation stage, created a vacuum of knowledge and awareness in the potential public-private collaboration opportunities at the implementation phase.
- Communication and stakeholder support: There is a general communication and transparency deficit regarding the implementation of projects and initiatives stemming from the GAWB Action Plan. This is reflected in the production of only one GAWB Action Plan Implementation Report. Interviewees noted that stakeholders and citizens are not informed about GAWB Action Plan implementation and have called for a more structured approach to communication. Limited consultation and communication have contributed towards a 'lack of ownership of the action plan' and limited support among key stakeholders.
- Public procurement laws and regulations: Strict public procurement laws and regulations make GAWB Action Plan implementation demanding. Inflexible rules are a barrier in the development of targeted GAWB Action Plan implementation projects. Interviewees noted that procurement rules and regulations are hard to overcome and there is no political will to change procedures and assist implementation. However, it is important to note that these regulations are not unique to GAWB Action Plan initiatives as these challenges apply to different types of investments and procurement. Moreover, with the EU's introduction of stricter green public procurement rules, the landscape down

the road will become even more complex. This highlights not only the legal constraints, but also the critical need for enhanced public procurement systems and capacities to ensure proper execution and oversight.

- **Broad measurement indicators:** The GAWB Action Plan indicators are viewed by interviewees as overly broad and difficult to measure. Interviewees pointed out that GAWB indicators are vague and not targeted to national specificities which decreases their usefulness as measurement tools. Most indicators are listed at an abstract level and clear timelines or precise indicator metrics for monitoring and evaluating are lacking, which decreases their usefulness and applicability to different contexts.
- **Timeframe:** The timelines for implementing GAWB Action Plan actions are not specific enough. Interviewees noted that the temporal structure of the GAWB Action Plan have limited implementation opportunities as the goals and targets are made against too short a timeline. They noted that most actions are listed at an abstract level and clear timelines or precise metrics for monitoring implementation are lacking. Other interviewees noted that some timelines are vaguely broad and long-term, such as the need 'for continuous improvement until 2030', which reduces the immediacy for implementation action.
- **Policy overload and incoherence:** Public authorities are suffering from an overload of climate and environmental policies, strategies, directives, and regulations. Interviewees noted that the implementation of the GAWB Action Plan creates an additional burden on WB public administrations on top of the long list of requirements already imposed as part of the EU accession process. Perhaps even more importantly, this burden is exacerbated by a lack of consistency and coherence across requirements and with existing commitments. Consequently, representatives from public authorities expressed the importance of implementing the GAWB Action Plan through existing policy structures and fundings bodies, and to better align the fragmented directives and requirements to avoid expanding the administrative burden to unsustainable levels and streamline the processes.
- **Limited capacities:** The challenge of policy overload is also linked to limited existing capacities within public administrations. Interviewees pointed out that that many national departments lack climate and environmental knowledge and expertise and could benefit from closer relationships with experts working with these topics within universities and research centres.
- **Sustainable collaboration:** The staff of national ministries is changing constantly which creates a barrier to long term collaboration. Interviewees noted that national policymakers and civil servants are pivotal in building technical knowledge and sharing good practices around the GAWB Action Plan policy areas; however, a continuous turnover of staff and changing governments with different priorities reduces inhouse knowledge and disrupts dialogue across authorities and other stakeholders within countries and transnationally.

## **6. Conclusions and recommendations for improving GAWB development and implementation processes**

The GAWB represents a unique experiment in macroregional governance building in the WB region (Moodie et al., 2025 forthcoming). There are many existing macroregional collaboration platforms involving European states and WB countries, but the GAWB is distinctive in that participation is exclusive to WB countries and it is targeted at building collaboration and coherence under climate and environmental policy focused themes. If implemented effectively, the GAWB Action Plan can strengthen climate and environmental policy cohesion between WB countries, while also laying the foundation for genuine transnational and cross-border collaboration under key green agenda themes. The GAWB also plays an important role in supporting EU accession by helping align national

climate and environmental legislation and policies of WB countries with the goals and objectives of the EU Green Deal.

The GAWB represents a positive first step in building and strengthening macroregional collaboration under the green agenda theme; however, in its current form, the GAWB Action Plan does not appear to generate meaningful actions and outputs. The development of the GAWB Action Plan has been criticised as a top-down intergovernmental processes dominated by EU and national level actors with a limited and curtailed role for the sub-national level administration and other key stakeholders, including SMEs, NGOs, and a range of interest and societal groups. Despite the strong influence from EU priorities, the instruments for coordinating collaboration and action across countries appears to be missing. National level actors have been granted autonomy and discretion to implement non-binding measures how they see fit within the context of national priorities and existing legal, regulatory, and policy structures. The GAWB Action Plan implementation process has been criticised for being heavily influenced by large industrial sectors across WB states. That national level actors and industrial sectors are the dominant players in the GAWB Action Plan process is not entirely surprising; firstly, because the preparation of the GAWB overarching framework and action plan was dominated by national level ministries with little involvement of regional and local stakeholder groups. Secondly, because of the dominant role of national ministries in implementation of the GAWB Action Plan, where most of the GAWB Action plan projects and activities focus on the national level and require national level coordination. Thirdly, WB countries have a centralised governance system with limited roles and responsibilities for sub-national level actors. Fourth, as the largest polluters, large industrial sectors are essential actors for achieving GAWB Action Plan targets, therefore, require a central role in policy discussion and implementation, but not at the neglect of other actors. This highlights a need to open GAWB Action Plan development and implementation processes up to a broader range of stakeholders.

The current national level focus of GAWB Action Plan activities has the potential to promote increased policy coherence across WB countries but does not contribute towards genuine transnational and cross-border policy collaboration, dialogue, and knowledge exchange between WB countries. Interviews suggest that some of the GAWB Action Plan areas do not naturally align with transnational and cross-border collaboration, like decarbonisation and depollution. Some interviewees commented that these themes are better addressed nationally, as improvements at national level will promote policy cohesion and benefit the WB region as a whole. However, other interviewees highlighted that the potential for macroregional collaboration may be more amenable in areas such as the circular economy and biodiversity and nature protection. This indicates that moving forward, the GAWB Action Plan can focus more on identifying areas for targeted transnational and cross-border collaboration.

The paper concludes by outlining recommendations designed to support upcoming GAWB Action Plan revision activities being led by the RCC. These include recommendations for improving the effectiveness of GAWB Action Plan policy formulation and implementation processes. This includes recommendations targeted at enhancing the macroregional collaborative elements within the GAWB Action Plan. The recommendations have been developed based on feedback and inputs from the interviews with key stakeholders involved in GAWB formulation and implementation processes. These recommendations are primarily targeted at RCC representatives responsible for coordinating and facilitating GAWB activities and revision processes. The recommendations are also directed with

other key public and private stakeholders across the WB region who are interested in participating in GAWB development and implementation.

### **6.1. GAWB Action Plan Formulation Recommendations**

Based on the identified risks, and the occurrence of the already identified risks by the project, GreenFORCE partners, suggest the revision of the table on critical risks as following:

- Identify areas for targeted transnational and cross-border collaboration under existing GAWB Action Plan policy themes: RCC can establish a GAWB Action Plan working group focused on discussing and identifying areas for transnational and cross-border collaboration under key GAWB Action Plan themes (i.e. sharing resources, knowledge and expertise, and working together directly to develop and implement specific policies, actions, plans etc.). Interviewees suggested that themes such as the circular economy, nature and biodiversity protection, and green innovation were areas with higher potential for transnational collaboration, particularly in cross-border regions where sharing physical infrastructure and resources is a more tangible possibility. Areas identified for potential transnational and cross-border collaboration should be made explicit under each theme/sub-theme in the updated version of the GAWB Action Plan.
- Identify newly emerging potential GAWB Action Plan themes and sub-themes: GAWB Action Plan themes are in a constant state flux and rapidly changing in response to new climate and environmental challenges and opportunities. It has been nearly four years since the first GAWB Action Plan was developed and introduced in 2021, so the RCC must work together with national ministries and other key stakeholders to identify any important new overarching climate and environmental themes and sub-themes that need to be addressed. These new themes and sub-themes should be included in an updated version of the GAWB Action Plan.
- Establish where there is a need for increased transnational cohesion under existing GAWB Action Plan themes: An up-to-date GAWB Action Plan implementation assessment and independent evaluation of national level climate and environmental policies/strategies is needed to establish where WB countries currently stand in relation to meeting GAWB Action Plan theme goals and targets. Through this assessment, the RCC, national ministries, and other stakeholders can assess where there has been progress in enhancing transnational cohesion under existing GAWB Action Plan themes and sub-themes. This process can help highlight which existing GAWB Action Plan themes/sub-themes need further prioritization, or if certain themes/sub-themes can be deprioritized as substantial progress in relation to transnational cohesion has been made.
- Promote evidence-based policymaking: The revised GAWB Action Plan goals and targets should be based on the latest evidence-based climate and environmental research (e.g. environmental and climate impact assessments, regulatory impact assessments, socio-economic impact assessments), as well as on systems transformations and socio-economic implications. Universities and research centres can play a crucial role in providing up-to-date evidence-based knowledge to inform discussions. Besides high-level policymaking, practitioners and technical staff within public administrations should be more actively exposed to state-of-the-art research on sustainability (green) transitions and be trained on how to combine multi-disciplinary knowledge. Equipped with knowledge, practitioners

from across ministries, agencies and sectors need to work together in the design of action plans, strategies, and in implementation both nationally and in transnational set-ups. Practitioners should be equipped with the knowledge and tools to identify areas needing macroregional cooperation. As GAWB Action Plan coordinators, the RCC can facilitate the inclusion of academics and researchers in the GAWB Action Plan revision process and establishing mechanisms for them to work in more practical ways in tandem with practitioners.

- Emphasize place-based policymaking: The GAWB Action Plan revision process should include context-based results from across the WB region, including environmental and climate impact assessments, regulatory impact assessments, socio-economic impact assessment. More empirical studies are required about the specific characteristics of WB climate and environmental idiosyncrasies and economies across different countries and regions, and the way these specificities affect policy implementation.
- Initiate early-stage stakeholder engagement and consultation process for GAWB Action Plan revision, targeted at underrepresented actor groups: The development of the first GAWB Action Plan was criticised by interviewees as being a top-down process dominated by national level actors and industrial sectors. As GAWB Action Plan coordinators, the RCC can facilitate more open and inclusive processes in the GAWB Action Plan revision process. Early-stage stakeholder engagement should target local level authorities, represented through NALAS, and other key stakeholder groups, including NGOs, CSOs and SMEs. These underrepresented group bring important expertise, knowledge, and territorial level perspectives into discussions which can help improve multi-level governance collaboration and develop GAWB Action Plan goals and targets that address regional challenges and meet citizens' needs.
- Develop measurable targets and assessment indicators with clear timelines for each GAWB theme/sub-theme: The RCC can work closely together with national statistic offices and climate and environmental academic experts to develop measurable targets and qualitative and quantitative assessment indicators for each GAWB Action Plan theme/sub-theme. Interviewees noted that timelines for meeting targets should be more pragmatic, avoiding short-term targets that are too unrealistic to be achieved and reducing the number of long-term targets that are not sufficient to stimulate immediate action.
- Cross-reference GAWB Action Plan themes and goals with other transnational, cross-border, and macroregional collaboration frameworks: There are many transnational, macroregional, and cross-border frameworks for promoting collaboration between countries in relation to core GAWB Action Plan themes and sub-themes (see Part 3 above). It is important to assess and cross-reference these ongoing activities with any proposed GAWB Action Plan revisions. This would ensure that GAWB Action Plan themes and goals will 1) lead to implementation activities that fill gaps in existing collaboration initiatives; 2) focus on new areas for collaboration; and 3) avoid duplicating work and funding.

## **6.2. GAWB Action Plan Implémentation Recommendations**

- Establish a clear mandate for GAWB Action Plan implementation: Interviewees noted the RCC lacks the mandate to effectively implement the GAWB Action Plan. The governance structure for the GAWB Action plan needs to be improved regionally in relation to implementation outlining which actors need to drive and lead the process. Currently, no

institution has clear mandate to lead the process and take ownership of implementation, with a proper mandate. For example, a lead ministry could be appointed each WB country to take an advisory and coordination role for implementing the GAWB Action Plan, working in collaboration with other key stakeholders.

- Strengthen the multi-level governance dimension of GAWB Action Plan implementation: GAWB Action Plan implementation has largely been conducted through large-scale national level project conducted through ministries working together with large industrial sectors in each WB country. The revised GAWB Action Plan should stipulate that all implementation activities and initiatives should include actors from across all levels of governance. The emphasis should be on involving regional and local institutions and stakeholders who can bring important local knowledge of territorial socio-economic and environmental specificities to the discussion.
- Provide clarity on the roles and responsibilities of different actors in GAWB Action Plan implementation processes under each theme/sub-theme: The current GAWB Action Plan has a very general and vague section of governance and stakeholder engagement. The revised GAWB Action Plan should provide greater clarity and specificity on the roles of different actors in the implementation of GAWB Action Plan goals and targets. This analysis should be targeted and specific, outlining the roles and responsibility of different actors in relation to each GAWB Action Plan theme/sub-themes. This would help raise the awareness of different stakeholder groups of opportunities to participate in GAWB activities and provide some indication on what their potential roles in these implementation processes could be.
- Encourage the development of cross-border green innovation ecosystems and industrial symbiosis networks to support GAWB Action Plan implementation: Interviews revealed that there is scope for genuine cross-border collaboration under themes including circular economy, where there is the possibility to develop shared facilities and collection points for waste management. There is also an opportunity to generate value from wasted or underutilised resources, particularly via industrial symbiosis, as in exchange of resources, heat and energy across industries and uses, also at a cross-border level. The revised GAWB Action Plan should highlight the potential for cross-border collaboration to enhance resource flows, generating value added, and minimising waste.
- Develop a transnational knowledge exchange platform under each GAWB Action Plan theme: Networks for peer-to-peer learning are important for providing new data and standards for developing policies, including different models and processes which you can learn from. Under some GAWB Action Plan themes, direct transnational and cross-border collaboration is not feasible or desirable (i.e. directly sharing resources and working together). However, as all WB countries are developing and implementing different policy approaches under more nationally focused GAWB Action Plan themes/sub-themes, there is the possibility of sharing newly acquired knowledge and experience with other WB partners. One idea suggested during interviews was to build transnational knowledge hubs under each GAWB Action Plan theme/sub-themes. These hubs would provide a platform where policymakers, universities, research centres, businesses, NGOs, and CSOs can share knowledge and expertise on best practices and failures that can support other GAWB Action Plan implementation processes.
- Promote citizen engagement in GAWB Action Plan implementation activities: Citizen awareness of and engagement in GAWB Action Plan implementation processes has so far

been negligible. The revised GAWB Action Plan should establish mechanisms to activate citizens in the implementation of the GAWB. Interviewees noted that while the direct engagement of citizens in difficult, NGOs, CSOs, energy cooperatives and citizen energy engagement communities can play an important role in representing citizen perspectives and needs. Procurement rules can ensure that citizens are adequately represented by allocating a key role for these groups in GAWB Action Plan implementation activities and initiatives.

- Build public-private collaborative partnerships to support GAWB Action Plan implementation: Large industrial sectors have dominated GAWB Action Plan implementation processes at the expense of other key actors, including societal and environmental NGOs/CSOs, and other key stakeholders like SMEs and universities. To address this challenge, national level procurement rules around the implementation of the GAWB Action Plan activities should establish collaborative models as a precondition to accessing funding. The implementation of climate and environmental policies requires multi-actor collaboration, particularly horizontal cooperation between public authorities and other key stakeholders at local levels.

### **6.3. GAWB Action Plan Financial Recommendations**

- Allocate targeted funds for transnational and cross-border collaboration in the implementation of the GAWB Action Plan: Currently, available funding for implementing the GAWB Action Plan has primarily focused on national infrastructure projects. Funding should also focus on GAWB Action Plan implementation initiatives that foster direct collaboration between institutions and stakeholders in different WB countries. The emphasis should be on transnational and cross-border projects that promote the sharing of resources and knowledge that help deliver GAWB Action Plan goals. A particular focus should be on funding projects that build green innovation ecosystems and industrial symbiosis networks in cross-border regions.
- Explore alternative forms of public and private financing: Finance for the implementation of the GAWB Action Plan is extremely limited. The limited financial resources available requires identifying alternative forms of public and private funding. The green transition cannot rely solely on EU, UN agencies, national development funds, World Bank and philanthropic donors. There needs to be a genuine interest locally for development and investing local resources. Collaborative business models that are viable and attractive for businesses to invest their own resources need to be identified, for instance in generating value from waste, energy production, district heating, transport systems, etc.
- Target funds for institutional and stakeholder capacity building: The RCC is currently under-resourced to fully fulfil the ambitious role as GAWB Action Plan coordinators. The lack of resources makes organising and conducting comprehensive GAWB Action Plan stakeholder consultation processes extremely difficult. Furthermore, the RCC also lacks other capacities, including expert knowledge around key GAWB Action Plan themes and depends on stakeholder support to formulate effective goals and indicators. Additional funding should be allocated to the RCC to build inhouse capacities to be able to conduct a thorough assessment and revision of the GAWB Action Plan based on open and inclusive involvement of all relevant actors across WB countries.

#### 6.4. GAWB Communication Recommendations

- Advertise opportunities to participate in GAWB Action Plan development and implementation processes to key stakeholders: There is low awareness and interest levels amongst key stakeholders that should be involved in GAWB Action Plan development and implementation. The RCC needs to advertise GAWB Action Plan consultation processes widely through their WB networks. NALAS could also provide substantial support with disseminating participation opportunities and facilitating the engagement of local level stakeholders. Advertisements need to be sent out well in advance of planned consultation activities to ensure maximum participation and to allow stakeholders sufficient time to prepare. The RCC can also explore the possibility for online consultation and digital meetings to widen participation opportunities for stakeholder that do not have the time and financial resources to travel long distances. As a result, inclusive and open participation processes should increase the levels of stakeholder support and acceptance for the GAWB Action Plan.
- Clearly communicate the main aims and objectives of the GAWB to citizens: Citizen awareness of the GAWB is very low. The RCC can work together with NALAS and local level NGOs and CSOs to increase the transparency and visibility of GAWB aims and objectives for citizens. Social media tools can be used to enhance citizen awareness and knowledge of the GAWB. The RCC could also establish an online citizen consultation platform to receive feedback from citizens with an interest in GAWB processes. Citizen communication efforts should avoid policy and academic jargon, using a simple and comprehensible language that easily understandable for citizens.
- Build an online platform to provide regular updates showcasing key GAWB Action Plan implementation results to stakeholders and citizens: The proactive dissemination of GAWB Action Plan activities and outputs is important for raising stakeholder and citizen awareness and knowledge. An online platform should be setup to collect and aggregate information in one place (based on actual performance indicators), and systematically update on the progress of the Action Plan implementation This platform should be used also to disseminate good policies and practices that have proven successful in advancing the GAWB Action Plan at different governance and territorial levels, including transnational/cross-border, national, and local level collaborations.

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## Annex 1. Overview of Interviewees

Interview Reference Code <sup>1</sup>	I/FG <sup>2</sup>	Sector	Location
IS1	FG	National gov.	Belgrade, Serbia
IS2	FG	National gov.	Belgrade, Serbia
IS3	FG	Political international organisation	Belgrade, Serbia
IBiH1	I	Business	Sarajevo, BiH
IBiH2	FG	Political International Organisation	Online
IBiH3	FG	Political International Organisation	Online
IBiH4	FG	Political International Organisation	Online
IBiH5	FG	Political International Organisation	Online
INM1	I	National gov	Skopje, RNM
INM2	I	EU gov.	Skopje, RNM
INM3	FG	Local gov. / Political International Organisation	Skopje, RNM
INM4	FG	Local gov. / Political International Organisation	Skopje, RNM
INM5	FG	Local gov. / Political International Organisation	Skopje, RNM
INM6	FG	Local gov. / Political International Organisation	Skopje, RNM
INM7	FG	Academia	Skopje, RNM
INM8	FG	NGO	Skopje, RNM
INM9	FG	NGO	Skopje, RNM
INM10	FG	NGO	Skopje, RNM
IA1	I	Academia	Tirana, Albania

<sup>1</sup> Interviewee Serbia (IS); Interviewee Bosnia and Herzegovina (IBiH); Interviewee Republic of North Macedonia (INM); Interviewee Albania (IA)

<sup>2</sup> Interview (I) or focus-group interview (FG)