

PART I

TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE IN THE WESTERN
BALKANS: MULTI-SCALAR APPROACHES
AND PERSPECTIVES

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FOREWORD: TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE
IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: MULTI-SCALAR
APPROACHES AND PERSPECTIVES

Abstract. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the Western Balkans have embarked on a complex path of transition and societal transformation, that was intended to eventually lead to their integration into the European Union. The pace of this process has, however, varied, with some countries already having acquired membership, while others still struggling. Territorial governance plays a particularly important role in this process, as the internal cohesion of the region is key to its successful integration into the EU. However, knowledge on territorial governance in the Western Balkans is still limited and fragmented. This special issue aims to shed some light on the matter, discussing territorial governance contexts and practices in the Western Balkans from a multi-scalar perspective. This editorial serves as an introduction to the special issue, framing its context and guiding the reader through the articles that follow.

Key words: Western Balkans, territorial governance, spatial planning, transition, European integration.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Though numerous contributions focusing on territorial governance in Europe and its countries have already been developed, they have mostly concerned EU Member States (Loughlin, 2009; Schmitt and Van Well, 2015; Tulumello *et al.*, 2020). At the same time, except for a small number of recent contributions (Cotella and Berisha, 2016; Berisha *et al.*, 2018, 2021a; Allkja, 2019; Faludi, 2020; Toto and Shutina, 2021), meaningful, systematised knowledge on Western Balkan countries is still missing. With an aim to fill this gap, this special issue positions itself within the current discourse and research on territorial governance, by exploring selected Western Balkan territorial governance practices from a multi-scalar perspective.

The Western Balkans are emerging as a macro-region in the European context, from both geographical-historical and political perspectives (Solly and Berisha, 2021). The region is rich in local and regional diversity and features complex socio-economic and environmental interactions that have led to internal conflicts, and an external perception of being ‘intriguing and provocative’ (TG-WeB, 2018; 2019). The region’s multi-faceted relations are a reflection of the territory and of the way it is being used. The territory of the Western Balkans, a common resource to the people living there, is important to the future of Europe in relation to numerous aspects: climate change, pollution mitigation, geopolitics, energy networks, migration and stability, the rule of law, and economic development (Uvalic, 2019).

As such, the Western Balkans are an integral part of Europe. The region shares its heritage and history with the Member States that surround it geographically, and the region’s countries intend to join the EU and actively participate in the definition of joint development strategies and trajectories (Berisha and Cotella, 2021). In fact, while recent, geopolitical definitions of the Western Balkan region have included only six countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*¹, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia), geographically speaking the region encompasses countries that are already members of the European Union (EU), such as Croatia and Slovenia, but also a part of Bulgaria, and possibly other countries. After all, the region is a territorial construct, composed of communities and cultures, and ecosystems and geographies that are strongly interlinked, and which have interacted with one another and with other surrounding European territories throughout history, regardless of any shifts in national borders or any other political conventions. In fact, one of the goals of this special issue is to contribute, *i.a.*, to the further integration of the region, both globally and within the European Community. As a result, the special issue moves away from a container view on the region, and includes contributions focusing on countries that, while being now

¹ This designation (*) is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

fully integrated into the EU, historically and geographically shared a common regional legacy with those that are associated with the geopolitical definition of the Western Balkans. In this light, integration is here embraced as a multi-faceted concept that sees the coexistence of a political/administrative and societal dimension, with the latter being crucial to achieving the former.

Aiming at introducing the above issues, this contribution serves as an editorial, setting its context and presenting the editors' view and approach to the subject matter. After this brief incipit, the following section introduces the fluidity that has characterised the region over the past 30 years, as a consequence of the transition from the common socialist and communist past towards market-oriented economic and institutional models, and of the incremental engagement with the EU integration process. The multi-scalar implications of these processes for the territorial governance of the region and its countries are discussed in section three, before the authors leap forward to reflect on what the future of the Western Balkan region's territorial development and governance could entail. Finally, the structure of the special issue is presented, as a useful roadmap for navigating its contents more easily.

2. THE WESTERN BALKANS: A SPACE IN FLUID TRANSITION

Since the early 1990s, the Western Balkans has undergone a transformation under multiple perspectives. Democratisation and institutional reforms overlapped nation building efforts and EU integration, and were not exempt from conflicts. The transition towards market economy required first and foremost the creation of new institutions to guarantee the introduction of a market economy and the abandonment of state planning logics (Cotella, 2007). Overarching reforms and new institutional practices had to be introduced, in order to move away from the former legacy of the past.

Although some degree of democracy was introduced right at the beginning of the 1990s, the Western Balkans experienced transition at a later stage, if compared to Central and Eastern European countries, due to internal geopolitical challenges (Rupnik, 2000). As a consequence, differences among countries in relation to the level of democracy, as well as that of economic development persisted until recently and have continued to cast their shadow. In fact, while Central and Eastern European transition economies had been successfully developing throughout the 1990s (Cotella, 2014), this was not the case for the Western Balkans, which in 1998 featured lower development levels than in 1989.² This delayed transition

² The GDPs of Western Balkans' countries in 1998 ranged from 35% of their 1989 level in Bosnia and Herzegovina to the 86% in Albania (Uvalic, 2001).

brought new challenges for the region, with all countries that struggled to introduce sound conditions for self-sustainable economic growth, often due to weak institutional and organisational capacity. Overall, the building of institutions capable of overcoming the old and emerging challenges was one of the key issues that characterised the region throughout the 1990s and the 2000s. In turn, this situation contributed to hampering socioeconomic development, with progress along market lines that were hard to achieve in the presence of a state sector still ineffective in fulfilling its basic functions (Gligorov *et al.*, 1999).

Due to these complexities, the Western Balkan region has continued to be perceived by most outside observers as a fluid space of change, a sort of “Europe’s wild west” where major political and institutional transformations have occurred in the last decades and are still ongoing (Olsen, 2000, p. 70). Throughout the path towards European integration, the concept of “quality of institutions has emerged as a key aspect of territorial governance” (Pere and Bartlett, 2019, p. 75). Even though the Western Balkans seems to be lagging in various aspects of *good governance* and the *rule of law*, the situation could “improve or worsen depending on what decisions are taken” (Čeperković and Gaub, 2018, p. 20). In particular, each national context has evolved as a consequence of a mixture of internal and external stimuli, generating a highly complex, differential, and fluid landscape. The emergence of decentralisation processes has been accompanied by the growing importance of regionalisation mechanisms. At the same time, this has also led to the need to improve both horizontal and vertical coordination, as well as to introduce public participation mechanisms, promoting an active role of citizens in political and planning decisions.

Despite the described turbulence and the challenges posed by the transition, through time Western Balkan countries have implemented a sequence of steps that progressively have steered the region towards the EU. The prospect of membership was extended to Western Balkans countries in the year 2000, when the heads of EU States and Governments confirmed the prospect of Balkan countries as potential candidates for EU membership at the Feira European Council. This EU policy shift towards the Balkan region created high expectations that the enlargement strategy could discipline democratic institution-building and foster post-communist reforms in the same way that it did in the previous candidates. In order to be admitted for membership, countries had to, however, comply with strict EU political, economic and legal requirements. Such a relationship implies that, during the last 20 years, the EU has exerted an impact on the Western Balkans, triggering episodes of Europeanisation (Stead and Cotella, 2011; Cotella, 2020), where Western Balkan countries reviewed much of their legislation, adapted existing institutions or built new ones conforming to the EU’s legislation, policies, and standards. As a result, all the countries have experienced major transformations, the most direct ones concerning the structures of their public administrations and a change in the substance and processes of democratic governance.

More specifically, in recent years, the EU has developed and implemented policies to support the gradual integration of all the countries, which were involved in a progressive partnership in order to stabilise the region and establish a free-trade area. However, the European integration process varies greatly from country to country of the Western Balkan region, with Slovenia, which had already acquired its membership status in 2007, and Croatia which followed its footsteps in 2013. Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia are now official candidates, and accession negotiations and chapters opened in 2012 with Montenegro and in 2013 with Serbia. At the same time, the EU integration process is still at its early stages in relation to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, two countries that are identified as potential candidates. Overall, while stabilisation policies and agreements have entered into force in all countries, although at different stages, the European Commission 2019 annual report highlighted that many of them did not seem to have “yet met the required standards as to economic, political, administrative, legal and human rights policies” (Osbuild and Bartlett, 2019, p. 3).

By dint of the above issues, a number of questions has been raised concerning the Western Balkans’ readiness to join the EU, and the most sceptic observers consider Western Balkan countries potentially *second-class members*. However, despite the scepticism and uncertainty surrounding the EU integration process, it appears nowadays irreversible for all countries at stake. “Europe [...] stands as the common denominator around which a new collective identity of the Balkans has begun to crystallize” (Bechev and Andreev, 2005, p. 22), and this puts the accession into the EU at the centre of any long-range vision for the region. While it is not yet certain whether “elites and constituencies throughout the region increasingly share a European orientation” (Balkan Forum, 2004, p. 5), they will have to stand to the task as tangible measures need to be taken, and compliance with EU standards and consequently the launch of the opening process rests on them.

Be that as it may, throughout the years, European policies and programmes seem to have promoted a progressive openness of the territorial governance systems of the various countries towards European aims and priorities, as a consequence of the numerous initiatives put in place by the EU through its candidate and neighbourhood policies. By triggering various Europeanisation mechanisms, the pre-accession process has led to several rearrangements in the territorial governance systems that characterise the various countries. As clearly indicated in the ESTIA report (2000, p. 10), the impact of the EU integration process on the Western Balkan region can be seen in “a number of issues concerning both the administrative context and the policy instruments of spatial planning, though in a different mix depending on the particular country and its stage of transition and restructuring.” According to ESTIA (2000, pp. 10–11), these changes are evident in: (i) the establishment of new territorial divisions and new regional institutions; (ii) the introduction of the environmental dimension in the physical planning approach; (iii) the effort to provide relevant information for spatial planning and

development; and (iv) the effort to establish mechanisms for public participation and consultation in the spatial planning decisions. New administrative levels have been established, which are comparable with the European NUTS system and often given responsibility for the coordination of EU programming activities. As regards the environmental dimension, various EU sectoral directives and regulations (e.g. water and waste management, nature conservation) have been transposed on the domestic legislation of the various countries. Information and monitoring mechanisms have also been promoted in order to provide a better implementation of policies and projects, as well as to promote more effective spatial development. Moreover, the European model has enabled Western Balkan countries to implement more strategic instruments and programmes, at the same time leading to higher cooperation between the states.

3. WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE?

The historical pathways and development in the Western Balkans have led to complex implications for territorial governance in the region (Berisha *et al.*, 2018, 2021b; Faludi, 2020). The concept of governance itself is inherently complex; different theories and approaches use or define the term in different ways, and with different levels of precision. Additionally, its potential dimensions (structures, actors, mechanisms, levels, etc.) are rather broad, and characterised by various sub-systems, multiple and heterogeneous components, network interactions, and the *emergence* factor (Schneider, 2012). When coupled with the territorial dimension, this complexity increases due to the multiplicity of elements that characterise socio-geographical constructs and that need to be considered when the latter enter the scope of governance processes and actions (Davoudi *et al.*, 2008; Faludi, 2012; Cotella *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, understanding and analysing the implications of (or for) territorial governance in the Western Balkans, is bound to embrace multi-scalar thinking, i.e., to handle several policy or development issues of spatial implications, connect or cut across disciplines and policy objectives, investigate territories of various sizes and relational depth, and examine and untangle multiple conduits of stakeholder interactions, including mechanisms of cooperation and/or competition.

The contributions included in this special issue discuss territorial governance in the Western Balkans in its evolution and consolidation over the last 30 years, during the transition and transformation period that the societies and governments instigated after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which put an end to the socialist systems and centralised economies in the Central East Europe. The emphasis of the historical period is intentional. The authors do recognise the *sturdy legacy* of the

past socio-political systems in Western Balkan countries (Koczan, 2016), but look towards a foresight and integration-fostering approach. Therefore, they try to dissect the (incomplete) transitions so far, focusing particularly on territorial governance, under the lenses of broader global perspectives and approaches, such as government decentralisation and regionalisation (Soderbaum and Shaw, 2003; Ruano and Profiriou, 2017), participatory democracies (Pateman, 2021), sustainable development, low carbon transition and climate change (Callway, 2013; Valkenburg and Cotella, 2014), and regional development and innovation (Cooke, 2013). A broad context of these perspectives for Western Balkan countries follows below.

Government decentralisation was very high in the political agenda of post-socialist countries soon after 1990, presented and implemented as a “global policy goal for supporting local democracy, improved governance and reduced regional inequalities” (Loewen, 2018, pp. 103). Decentralisation evolved along inter-related pillars, namely political, administrative, functional, economic, and fiscal, each following different speeds or trajectories in different countries. In the first half of the transition, decentralisation of government and then governance gave a significant impetus to local development and democracy in the Western Balkans. However, particularly in the last decade, the numerous challenges of decentralisation have become visible, including fragmentation, a lack of institutional capacities and resources in smaller local governments, corruption and/or bureaucracy obstacles, low or uneven technological diffusion in the territory, inadequate access to financial resources, etc. Most importantly, besides the fact that regionalisation or second-tier government reforms did not advance in the region, regional inequalities have increased and inner peripheries or less developed regions have not seen the expected social and economic gains (Loewen, 2018; Koczan, 2016; World Bank, 2021). Aiming at increasing the quality of public services and the efficiency and effectiveness of resource allocation, the countries of the Western Balkans have undertaken territorial, administrative, and governance reforms that indicated a tendency of re-centralisation. At the same time, however, such reforms have somehow reverted the impact of the first years of the transition, reducing subsidiarity and democratic legitimacy (see Loewen, 2018), without necessarily contributing to the intended efficiency objective, due to the politicisation of the reforms and the scarce transparency of the dynamics they generated.

When it comes to the impact of EU integration goals and requirements, the countries of the Western Balkans have been until recently mainly focusing on issues concerning the rule of law and fundamental rights. In 2018, the new Enlargement Perspective for the Western Balkans recognised that the functioning of democratic institutions should go beyond these criteria, emphasising also the importance of public administration reform, policy coordination, trust building on government institutions, local/regional economic development, etc. (OECD, 2020). EU country progress reports indicate each year that the sizeable gaps to be closed for the region to converge with EU in terms of governance, democracy, and

economic growth, remain significant, regardless of the positive trends identifiable in certain areas, such as public procurement, service delivery to businesses, etc. (*ibid.*) Importantly, even where a progress of some sort is detected, this has been uneven between countries, as well as between territories, indicating, i.a., an uneven distribution of governance capacities and strategies on the territorial level. In this respect, significant efforts for multi-level regional development governance are still required (Cotella *et al.*, 2021), to which the EU pre-accession process and related programmes have provided an important input. As a matter of fact, all countries have embraced some sort of regional policy discourses and initiatives, sometimes associated with government reforms, aiming at targeting weak regions and promoting economic, social and territorial cohesion. However, remains possible that in many cases the rhetoric underpinning regional development strategies and programmes is simply pretending to be adhering to EU spatial objectives and strategies, whereas resources are allocated and spent according to more pragmatic local reasons (Berisha *et al.*, 2021b).

From an economic growth perspective, the territories in the Western Balkans face the challenge of a not yet fully functional market economy (European Commission, 2018), mainly driven by small and medium enterprises (99% of all firms in the region), with a high share of micro-enterprises and low territorial competitiveness (OECD *et al.*, 2019). With a limited domestic market size and a limited purchasing power of the local population, coupled with high unemployment rates and skilled labour emigration to EU countries, Western Balkan territorial cooperation and openness (regionally and with Europe) become imperative to removing barriers for territorial development (OECD, 2020; OECD *et al.*, 2018). This would further contribute to addressing the spatial and socio-economic disparities that are currently very pronounced at the local level and between territorial dichotomies, such as urban and rural areas, central and peripheral settlements (including inner peripheries), and coastal and mountainous remote regions (see Gaifami *et al.*, 2020).

The region is also rich in territorial and natural resources that should be framed as competitive advantages in sustainable development, as well as used in the actions of the countries' smart specialisation strategies. The emphasis on natural resources and biodiversity, together with green infrastructure and green economies, seems to be a preferable territorial scenario for the Western Balkans.³ This is considered a means to overcome macro-regional competitiveness limitations, and build on niche territorial features and sectors (e.g., tourism or agriculture). In addition, such a focus should contribute to the countries' preparedness and mitigation efforts towards expected climate change effects, as well as to avoid a further spread of resource overexploitation and environmental pollution to the ecosys-

³ For more on this see the 'The ADRION 2021–2027 Territorial Analysis' and the ESPON TEVI – Territorial Scenarios for the EUSDR and EUSAIR macro-regions.

tems of the European Green Belt,⁴ the latter consisting of a large portion of the territory of the Western Balkans. However, the promotion of green economy in the Western Balkans is challenging and requires stronger institutions, better human capacities, and skilled labour. In response to the challenge, the region should definitely improve also in terms of research, development, and innovation. In 2018, the average research and development investment was only 0.5% of GDP in the Western Balkans, which contrasted clearly with the 1.15% in the CEEC⁵ and the 1.62% in the EU (OECD, 2021). The 2021 European Innovation Scoreboard has indicated the Western Balkans as an emerging innovator,⁶ while based on Eurostat data less than half of the patent applications made to the European Patent Office (EPO) from the region (approx. 100 in the years 2010–2019), were granted though suggesting substantial quality shortcomings. In addition, the overall expenditure on research and development remains low, and well below the EU level.

4. LOOKING THROUGH THE CRYSTAL BALL. WHAT WILL THE FUTURE ENTAIL?

The future of the Western Balkans within the EU and as a macro-region is far from being crystallised. The countries have endorsed EU integration as a political and societal objective, but their respective paths towards it have differed and have been, overall, slower than expected. This has fostered citizen scepticism about seeing their countries ever joining the European Union.⁷ The considerable risks for the EU caused by the weak rule of law, regressing democratic processes, and the borders swap discourse in the Western Balkans have hindered the integration. Indeed, the Balkans may be said to represent the most unstable region in Europe, with internal contested or unfinished ‘businesses’ (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2021) that negatively impact its EU trajectory. However, sluggish EU cooperation and commitment towards the region would only reinforce the regional vulnerabilities further, and would also institutionalise a void which could be filled by other international influences (see Cotella and Berisha, in this special issue).

The accession of the region in the EU is, therefore, trapped in political silos, but the societal actors are sensitive and responsive to territorial integration policies and actions that can prepare citizens and communities to bridge the stalling

⁴ <https://www.europeangreenbelt.org>.

⁵ Central East European Countries.

⁶ https://interactivetool.eu/EIS/EIS_2.html. No data for Albania and Kosovo*. At the regional level, assessment only for Serbia.

⁷ More on this see: <https://ecfr.eu/article/germanys-new-government-promising-signs-for-western-balkans-eu-integration/>.

relationship with EU territories. After all, the cultural links with the other countries of Central East Europe, the common legacies of the socialist regimes prior to 1990, the similar challenges shared during the transition period, as well as the territorial continuities, are the factors that bring communities closer, opposing the political narratives and in this process producing also tensions at a territorial development level. The Territorial Agenda 2030 (TA 2030 CEC, 2021) and the Economic and Investment Plan for the WB (European Commission, 2020) are relevant instruments and processes in this regard, which respectively provide further momentum to EU enlargement through a consolidated rationale on EU support and a large share of resources for territorial development.

More specifically, the Territorial Agenda 2030 “provides an action-oriented framework to promote territorial cohesion in Europe”, applying to every territory and focusing on people’s wellbeing, underlying the importance of spatial planning to the strengthening of the territorial dimension of sector policies and governance levels (*ibid.*, p. 3). Though most Western Balkan countries are not yet members of the EU, the TA 2030 is equally relevant to territorial governance in the region as it is for long-standing members. Much more than its predecessors, the TA 2030 conveys the message of its proponents also outside the EU area, encouraging the neighbouring countries to notice them and put them in practice at all territorial levels and scales. In fact, by participating in the implementation of TA 2030, Western Balkan actors and countries would reinforce the European perspective of the region also internally, in so achieving greater cohesion and a larger critical mass when negotiating the accession. This would happen through the alignment of territorial development priorities, but also through joint efforts in reducing the gap between the EU and the WB area in terms of quality of life, general interest services, territorial disparities, demographic imbalances, employment, and digital and green transitions. Additionally, TA 2030 actions tackling WB territories could also help decelerate and possibly reverse migration flows from the region towards EU countries, by enhancing the quality of places and empowering local value chains.

Additional fuel to achieve this goal is provided by the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, adopted by the European Commission in 2020. This plan aims to, i.a., support green and digital transitions, backed by a Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, in line with the EU Green Deal goal to make Europe the first climate neutral continent in the world. Climate change is expected to raise WB temperatures up to 4° C by the end of the century in a baseline, no-mitigation scenario (IPCC, 2014), followed by extreme weather events, increased occurrence rates of natural disasters, lower energy and water availability (Uvalić and Cvijanović, 2018), biodiversity loss and soil degradation, and social and economic consequences for communities. Economic, green, and digital transition plans aim at counteracting these effects by mitigating them and ensuring a smooth adaptation process with enhanced regional resilience. A region that invests in green technologies and infrastructures, next to promoting cooperation

instead of conflicting competition, will be better suited to steer local economies through the transition. It further means that societal actors should actively interact in polycentric networks of governance and direct their sense of urgency and priority towards the currently poor institutional and financial capacities, accompanied by brain-drain and a loss of quality human resources and workforce. This place-sensitive governance, with policies informed by knowledge and evidence, capable of recognising and even shaping future alternative scenarios of territorial development, would provide an impetus for sustainable development in the Western Balkans, as well as finally merging the region into the EU area.

5. A ROADMAP FOR READERS

After this brief editorial introduction, a number of contributions will discuss various aspects concerning the evolution, consolidation, and challenges of territorial governance in the Western Balkan Region. Their goal is to provide readers with additional information concerning the nuances that characterise the countries composing the region, considering it in various scales and from different perspectives. Here we provide a quick roadmap that readers may follow, in order to become acquainted with the contents of the various contributions before starting exploring them in more detail.

The first three articles focus on territorial governance policies as developed and implemented in a number of Western Balkan countries. The first contribution, by Ana Peric, Siniša Trkulja and Zora Zivanovic, proposes a comparative analysis of the European Union's territorial policy trends in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and reflects on how these countries are progressively moving from a conformative to a performative logic in their actions. The authors explore to what extent EU pre-accession has influenced both the formal regulative frameworks and the spatial planning practice in the two countries, and in so doing, they unveil a mismatch between the declaratively adopted EU territorial trends and the actual place-based needs. The second paper, written by Ledio Allkja and Kejt Dhrami, shifts the geographical focus of the special issue to Albania and Kosovo, reflecting on how spatial planning is used there to contribute to the territorial governance of cultural heritage. They discuss how the intensity of urban development, combined with low levels of institutional capacity, has put cultural heritage under increasing pressure. Adopting a comparative perspective to exploring the territorial governance of cultural heritage in both countries, the authors focus on the legal and institutional framework, policies, and stakeholders involved in some way in the protection of cultural heritage. The evolution and consolidation of the spatial governance and planning system of Slovenia constitutes the focus of the third article. In her work, Naja Marot offers an account of 30 years of

legal and institutional reforms in the country, reflecting on how the influence of the EU has contributed to the incremental consolidation of a territorial governance approach that is characterised by a mix of regulatory processes and plans.

After that, the special issue features two contributions concerning more closely governance related aspects. Firstly, through her work, Sonja Dragović explores the role that local, grassroots initiatives may have in propelling territorial governance changes in Montenegro. She discusses how these initiatives have gained importance, in recent years, in articulating the interests of local communities towards the preservation of the common good. Dritan Shutina and Rudina Toto focus their contribution on the territorial rescaling of governance in Albania towards a more polycentric model. More specifically, they analyse local-to-national case studies, investigating fragmentation, interdependencies, and functional mismatches by assessing territorial disparities and governance reforms that have occurred in the last 30 years.

The last three contributions shift the focus of the special issue to the investment mechanisms that accompany and back territorial governance processes. The contribution by Vesna Garvanlieva Andonova, Marjan Nikolov, Ivana Velkovska and Ana Marija Petrovska examines the territorial development agenda of North Macedonia and its orientation towards economic growth, discussing the effects of full capital budgets to address the present infrastructural gaps. The authors do so by testing several hypothetical scenarios of full capital budget utilisation that are expected to positively contribute to an immediate economic growth, as well as to produce longer term benefits. A peculiar EU investment instrument, the Integration Territorial Investments, constitute the focus of the analysis of Ivana Katuric and Sven Simon. In particular, they discuss the role that the adoption of this instrument in the Croatian context had for the development of strategic spatial planning activities, with particular reference to a number of case studies, by dint of the possibility to promote coordinated territorial development and governance within functional urban areas. Finally, Giancarlo Cotella and Erblin Berisha open the perspective to drivers and influences from outside the region, exploring the logics of China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Western Balkans, in terms of the vision, priorities, sectors and volumes of investments, and means of implementation, and compares them with those underlying the EU integration process. In so doing, the authors question whether the increasing inflow of resources, attached to different development priorities and implementation means, may progressively weaken the role of the EU in the region and, in turn, slower the region's integration with the EU.

The special issue concludes in a commentary by Peter Nientied and Dritan Shutina, who reflect on how the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic may trigger innovation in the tourism field, with particular reference to the Western Balkan Region. The contribution uses the creative destruction and innovation framework to reflect on the possible changes that may affect tourism consumers' behaviour, the spatial effects that these changes may bring along, and how the latter may result in an increasing attention to the concept of tourism resilience.

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