

# Coordination of security and justice work in the Western Balkans

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## Question

*What mechanisms exist to coordinate security and justice work in Western Balkans at the country and regional level?*

## Contents

1. Overview
2. Characteristics of regional cooperation
3. Security sectors
4. Components of coordination and cooperation
5. Mechanisms and initiatives for coordination and cooperation
6. Challenges to regional cooperation
7. Select recommendations
8. References

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## 1. Overview

In the 1990s, security threats in the Western Balkans were analysed primarily through national lenses, with neighbouring states perceiving each other as their main threats. Since then, there has been a transition toward an understanding that there are common threats, whose appropriate tackling requires transborder coordination and cooperation (Knezović et al., 2018). The strategic documents of Western Balkan countries state that regional cooperation is essential to their national and overall regional security – and in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration (Jakešević, 2019).

Key priorities in regional security and justice cooperation are fighting transborder organised crime, combating corruption, cooperation on migration, asylum and refugees and protection of fundamental rights (Bechev et al., 2015). This involves cooperation among police, prosecutors, border control and other officials working in security and justice sectors. Components of coordination and cooperation include:

- Legal frameworks that lay the foundation for inter-agency, bi-lateral, regional and multilateral cooperation
- Joint investigation teams, comprised of professionals from police, customs and judicial authorities, aimed at strengthening transborder cooperation in conducting investigations and exchanging information
- Joint operational databases on cases of organised crime that could facilitate investigations; and joint risk analysis
- Joint training and educational activities that can present best practices in the field and allow for sharing of experiences and trust-building
- Information sharing through regular meetings or networks
- Personal contacts and other non-formal dimensions of cooperation that could allow for more flexible and speedier cooperation

There have been successes in regional security cooperation, attributable in large part to several regional level initiatives (Emini and Marku, 2019) (see below). Cooperation in the Western Balkans has also advanced at the bilateral level. Between the years 2002-2015, the governments, internal ministries and police of Albania and Kosovo, for example, have signed 21 agreements, memoranda of understanding and common protocols (Ibraj, 2016). These have included documents for mutual legal assistance, parallel investigations, extradition and other forms of police and judicial cooperation (Ibraj, 2016). Cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo has often taken the form of informal platforms for communication, in the absence of formal, bilateral agreements in the security sector (Hoxha and Emini, 2014).

Inter-institutional cooperation at the national level is also necessary (Bačanović and Hristovski, 2018). In North Macedonia, for example, problems with coordination of the country's security structures remains. The Centre of Crisis Management, established with the task of coordinating the security community, has yet to deliver results (Gjurovski, 2018).

The vast majority of literature on mechanisms to coordinate security and justice work in Western Balkans centres on the regional level. As such, this report discusses coordination and cooperation efforts and mechanisms primarily at the regional level. Within the time-frame allocated, it was not possible to engage in in-depth research on each of the individual countries within the Western Balkans to uncover country level coordination mechanisms.

Regional level security and justice coordination and cooperation mechanisms and initiatives include:

- The Stability Pact/Regional Cooperation Council
- Southeast European Cooperative Initiative/ Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre
- Regional Anticorruption Initiative
- Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative
- Southeast Europe Police Chiefs Association
- Police Cooperation Centre
- Southeast European Prosecutors Advisory Group
- The South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapon
- Integrative Internal Security Governance
- Western Balkan Counter-Terrorism initiative
- The Horizontal Facility

Despite much progress in developing regional mechanisms to address security issues, the Western Balkans has still been identified as deficient in combatting serious organised crime, with gaps in regional coordination and in cooperation mechanisms (UNODC, 2019; Ademi, 2018). Challenges include uneven cooperation in the region, inadequate levels of trust to share sensitive information and to develop a community and common identity, and varying stages of development among the countries of the region (Emini and Marku, 2019).

There needs to be further specific efforts to promote innovative training of officials in security and justice sector-related agencies, such that they can better deal with complex, transborder security problems that require cooperation (Dokos, 2017). Efforts to promote sharing of experiences and interactions are also required not only in the security and justice sectors but among the general public. This could help to foster a greater sense of security community and trust, required to enhance a regional identity and regional cooperation (Emini and Marku, 2019; Cruise and Grillot, 2013). Establishing or strengthening the role of authorised contact persons/units for cooperation and information exchange could also help to improve cooperation at national, regional and multilateral levels (IOM, 2015).

## 2. Characteristics of regional cooperation

### External or locally-driven, top-down or bottom-up

Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans has developed through external and locally owned initiatives. **Externally driven initiatives for regional cooperation**, which comprise the **most common form**, have been promoted in large part by the EU and EU member states (Bechev et al., 2015; Prezelj, 2013). Locally owned initiatives have been proposed instead by governments or civil society actors within the region (Bechev et al., 2015).

Forms of regional cooperation can also be distinguished between top-down and bottom-up initiatives. Top-down initiatives are mainly political and implemented by governments; whereas, bottom-up initiatives can consist of cooperation between governments, if they were externally motivated, or cooperation between civil society actors, if they were driven by local actors (Bechev et al., 2015). In some cases, while regional cooperation initiatives may have begun as externally

driven, they later became locally owned, such as in the case of the Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI). For further discussion of MARRI, see the Section on mechanisms and initiatives.

Enhanced cooperation in the security sector in the Western Balkans is driven in large part by EU objectives (Emini and Marku, 2019; Jakešević, 2019). **EU conditionality is considered to be an external, top-down approach** (Jakešević, 2019). It is important, however, for countries in the Western Balkans to acknowledge that regional cooperation is for the benefit of the region and its citizens, and should be driven internally from the region (Emini and Marku, 2019).

Local top-down initiatives have expanded in recent years (Becheve et al., 2015). (See the Western Balkan Counter-Terrorism initiative in the Section on mechanisms and initiatives, for example). Regional countries have been taking on more responsibility in directing, managing and financing existing initiatives (Prezelj, 2013). Despite higher local ownership, there remains a lack of political will, inadequate commitment and financial and human resources to deepen regional cooperation (Bechev et al., 2015; Prezelj, 2013). The importance of external actors in boosting regional dynamics and regional cooperation thus remains essential (Jakešević, 2019; Bechev et al., 2019).

Local, bottom-up initiatives have intensified and contributed to a growing culture of regional cooperation (Bechev et al., 2019). Such civil society-led initiatives work toward common goals and often extend beyond the mandates of acting governments. They often tackle politically contested issues, such as overcoming past conflicts through transitional justice mechanisms (Bechev et al., 2015). It can be challenging however to manage large regional coalitions of civil society actors and to accumulate necessary resources (Bechev et al., 2015).

## Variation in cooperation

Since not all countries in the Western Balkans face identical security threats, it can be challenging to envisage a uniform type of cooperation suitable for all regional actors. Rather, the **level of cooperation often depends on the commonality of security threats** with which they are dealing (Knezović et al., 2018).

Cooperation tends to be significantly more developed with bordering countries within the Western Balkans, as they deal with similar issues. For example, the long, shared border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia implies the importance of cooperation between border police units (Knezović et al., 2018). Similarly, the promotion of bilateral police cooperation between Kosovo and Serbia is important in order to combat cross-border challenges and risks (Ademi, 2018). Serbia and Croatia have established deeper criminal police cooperation due to their need to tackle organised crime (Knezović et al., 2018). Cooperation with Albania and North Macedonia is also important to combat trafficking in humans and drugs (Knezović et al., 2018).

## 3. Sectoral cooperation

Key priorities in regional security and justice cooperation include: fighting transborder organised crime, combating corruption, cooperation on migration, asylum and refugees and protection of fundamental rights (Bechev et al., 2015). This requires cooperation on the part of various security and justice actors.

## Police cooperation

Regional cooperation in the field of policing seems to be improving noticeably, moving away from patterns in place during the conflict (Knezović et al., 2018). Police cooperation in the Western Balkans is considered as a tool to overcome the challenges of the past while strengthening efforts to counter organised crime and other security threats (Hoxha and Emini, 2014). Increases in cooperation can be attributed to the role of external actors, primarily EU and NATO accession processes and conditionality; and to internal politics, with the rise of new political elites who are more supportive of new types of cooperation (Knezović et al., 2018).

Regional cooperation between the security sectors in general, and particularly between regional police forces, is considered to be essential for the integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union (Ademi, 2018). Progress has been made since 2000, with improvements in formal cooperation within the framework of important international organisations, such as Interpol, Europol (international organisations with the mandate to prevent and combat criminality) or the Southeast Europe Police Chiefs Association (Knezović et al., 2018). In the case of Kosovo, however, denied membership in Interpol and Europol hinders the integration of Kosovo's police force with the region (Ademi, 2018).

Less formal initiatives and personal contacts have also intensified throughout the region. Non-formal communication among police in the region, fostered by the absence of a language barrier in the region, is a key element of cooperation, mentoring and experience-sharing (Knezović et al., 2018). It can also ensure fast response in the case of alarm announcement about where some felon is or where some illegal operation will take place; whereas procedures of the Ministries of the Interior may take too long (Knezović et al., 2018). See also the 'Personal contacts' section under Components of coordination and cooperation.

For further discussion on police cooperation, see the section on Mechanisms and initiatives-Southeast Europe Police Chiefs Association and Police cooperation centre.

## Prosecutorial cooperation

Prosecutors' networks have also been strengthened in the Western Balkans, as part of EU projects, with the key aim of facilitating cross-border investigation and prosecution of organised crime and corruption (Güroff and Kazanxhi, 2016). Specific forms of cooperation include the development of common investigation mechanisms and strategies against organised crime; regular meetings to exchange experiences and best practice findings; and the set-up of a central organisation responsible for dealing with mutual legal assistance requests<sup>1</sup> (Güroff and Kazanxhi, 2016). For further discussion, see: Southeast European Prosecutors Advisory Group in the section on Mechanisms and initiatives.

## Border management

Border protection is another promising and necessary area of increased cooperation, given continuing migration and refugee flows (Dokos, 2017). Regional cooperation in the framework of

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<sup>1</sup> Mutual legal assistance (MLA) in criminal matters is a process by which States seek for and provide assistance to other States in servicing of judicial document and gathering evidence for use in criminal cases. See: <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/organized-crime/module-11/key-issues/mutual-legal-assistance.html>

border security is regulated through bi- and multilateral agreements. These contain provisions centred on the opening of shared border crossing points, joint operations and joint patrolling, the exchange of information, and the opening of Police Cooperation Centres (Boshnjaku, 2017). There is currently joint patrolling with Montenegro, Kosovo and North Macedonia according to the schedule defined in cooperation between parties (Boshnjaku, 2017).

## **Cross-cutting: Gender-based violence**

There have been some improvements in coordination at the country level in the Western Balkans to address gender-based violence. In North Macedonia, for example, the National Coordinative Body for combating Domestic Violence was established in 2018. It is tasked with monitoring and analysing the national situation regarding domestic violence; coordinating the activities of the competent institutions; and proposing measures to combat such violence (Tadić et al., 2018). In Serbia, the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence has introduced various measures, including mandatory coordination and cooperation between services and institutions; and the establishment of a unified central electronic database on domestic violence (Tadić et al., 2018). In contrast, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is no comprehensive and harmonised system for monitoring and data collection on cases of violence against women. Methodologies and institutions for monitoring and collecting data differ between the Federation and Republika Srpska. There is no evidence of cooperation or data exchange between the two entities (Tadić et al., 2018).

## **4. Components of coordination and cooperation**

### **Frameworks**

Efforts to promote transborder law enforcement and regional cooperation in security and justice sectors have benefited from legislative harmonisation, bi-lateral and multi-lateral agreements and international conventions (Bechev et al., 2015). All countries of the region have signed the most important international conventions that facilitate common work (Knezović et al., 2018). In the field of regional police cooperation, for example, the existence of various signed agreements equip the states in the Western Balkans with a broad set of instruments to rely upon to deepen and widen cooperation. This includes operative cooperation, tactical cooperation, research cooperation and the development of shared approaches to fight against specific issues (Knezović et al., 2018).

### **Joint investigation teams**

Joint investigation teams (JITs) are an established effective cooperation tool aimed at tackling transborder crime. Comprised of professionals from police, customs and judicial authorities, they are crucial to strengthening transborder cooperation in conducting investigations, and to securing timely data collection and exchange of information and evidence (Lestanin and Nikac, 2019; IOM, 2015). They also allow for the sharing of experiences and best practices during the investigation, alongside the application of a multidisciplinary approach to problem solving (Lestanin and Nikac, 2019). Investigative activities are conducted jointly on the territory of one of the countries that participate in the JIT (IOM, 2015).

Alongside JITs, joint parallel investigations are considered a key tool for effective cross-border cooperation in investigating human trafficking and migrant smuggling cases (IOM, 2015). They



involve authorities conducting investigations autonomously in their territory of jurisdiction but in a coordinated and parallel way (IOM, 2015).

## **Joint database and risk analysis**

A joint operational database on cases of organised crime, such as human trafficking and migrant smuggling cases at the regional level, could support investigations and contribute to improved knowledge and capacities of all operators. It includes statistics on the profiles of the cases and perpetrators (IOM, 2015). Joint databases can also improve and converge the respective national operations and methods applied in the region to identify cases (IOM, 2015).

The comprehensive collection and processing of available information and statistics on identified and processed cases could also allow for in-depth joint risk analysis, conducted by all the countries in the region (IOM, 2015). This would enable the development of an effective transborder response that is harmonised, tailored and up-to-date in identifying cases of human trafficking and migrant smuggling (IOM, 2015).

## **Joint training and educational activities**

Following regional risk analysis exercises, joint training and other educational activities should be designed and conducted regularly for institutions and officials throughout the region involved in relevant security and justice work (IOM, 2015). Such training and activities should present best practices on how to detect, approach and tackle key issues, alongside the new procedures and referral mechanisms devised in order to adjust the institutional response to countering security threats (IOM, 2015).

Ongoing joint seminars for staff of security institutions throughout the Western Balkans (mainly among neighbouring countries) can help to harmonise approaches, share information, exchange experiences, build mutual trust and improve levels of cooperation (Bačanović and Hristovski, 2018).

## **Information sharing**

Effective, simple, and fluid exchanges of information between the stakeholders of different countries is required. At the same time, information exchange procedures need to respect the principle of national security, public stability and safety, principle to protect data and prevention of information leaks (IOM, 2015). Experience sharing and information exchange can be facilitated through regular meetings among representatives of law enforcement agencies and judiciary from neighbouring countries (see joint training section above); through a network of experts; and via the upgrading and improvement of secure data transmission systems (IOM, 2015).

## **Personal contacts**

Personal contacts and the non-formal dimension of cooperation, including experience sharing, can be a key element of successful cooperation. In the police sector, for example, personal contacts have made cooperation faster, easier and more effective. They have played an important role within the framework of the Southeast European Police Chiefs Association (SEPCA) (Knezović et al., 2018). For further discussion, see the police cooperation section.

The ability to network and develop contacts with colleagues from the other countries is not, however, necessarily a natural feature of all people. As such, the selection of officers responsible

for developing and maintaining contacts should be processed very carefully (Knezović et al., 2018). It is also important to ensure that officers act in the national interest and not in his/her personal one. In addition, it is necessary to address issues of continuity in the bureaucratic structures, should personal contacts gain too much prominence (Knezović et al., 2018).

## **5. Mechanisms and initiatives for coordination and cooperation**

Regional level coordination and cooperation is facilitated and supported by various regional platforms, such as regional centres and hubs; policy-level and operational-level networks; international projects and initiatives dedicated to fostering regional cooperation; and various forms of bilateral technical and other assistance (Đorđević et al., 2018; Bechev et al., 2015). The use of these platforms can enhance and strengthen the mechanisms of transborder cooperation and the capacities and skills of relevant stakeholders from each country (IOM, 2015).

Despite the existence of a variety of types of platforms and initiatives, cooperation is still heavily externally driven, mainly by the EU, and is to some extent donor-dependent. Countries within the Western Balkans are more likely to engage and contribute to an initiative if it functions effectively and produces results (Bechev et al., 2015).

### **The Stability Pact – Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)**

The Stability Pact was established in 1999 at the initiative of the European Union with the aim of establishing and reinforcing peace and security in Southeastern Europe. It brought together participants from the Western Balkan and neighbouring countries, EU member states, and key international organisations and financial institutions. The primary method of cooperation were the regularly-held conferences dealing with the matters of importance to the idea of regional cooperation (Paszkwicz, 2009). The Stability Pact was superseded by the Regional Cooperation Council in 2008. Its main goal is to support, coordinate and consolidate the main fields of regional cooperation in Southeastern Europe, including security and justice (Paszkwicz, 2009).

There are four law enforcement initiatives that were established by the Stability Pact: Migration, Asylum, and Refugee Regional Initiative (MARRI), Regional Anticorruption Initiative (RAI), Southeast European Cooperation Initiative – Regional Centre for Combating Trans-border Crime (SECI Centre) and Southeast European Prosecutors Advisory Group (SEEPAG). These centres contribute to the advancement and sustainability of regional cooperation in justice and security (Bechev et al., 2015). They are each discussed below.

### **Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (SECI)/ Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre (SELEC)**

SECI was launched in 1996, with the main task of bringing together law enforcement forces of 13 countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, North Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Turkey) with the aim of strengthening the fight against transborder organised crime. The Centre provides significant support to national (state) customs and law enforcement agencies by offering a reliable environment for collecting, analysing and sharing information and criminal intelligence in real time; knowledge development; threat assessment; joint planning and common action in the field



of transborder crime. It contributes to coordination of regional operations and supports investigations and crime prevention activities of the member states in transborder cases. In 2010/2011 the SECI Centre was transformed to SELEC (Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre (Kostadinović, 2017; Güroff and Kazanxhi, 2016; Maksimovic et al., 2015; Prezelj, 2013).

SELEC represents a significantly successful regional initiative. One of its most relevant outputs has been the Southeast European Organised Crime Threat Assessment, modelled after methodology adopted in the EU. In addition, Operation Mrak is an example of a successful operation that relied on strong multilateral police cooperation in the Western Balkans, facilitated by SELEC. The Slovenian criminal police identified an organised criminal group in Slovenia with strong connections with the Albanian organised criminal groups in North Macedonia, engaging in smuggling of drugs and weapons from North Macedonia and Italy. The ensuing operation involved the police forces of Slovenia, North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia and Italy. Their cooperation resulted in the exposure of the entire network of smugglers and traffickers (Prezelj, 2013).

### **Regional Anticorruption Initiative (RAI)**

The RAI (previously SPOC) was established in 2000 and renamed in 2007. It is the only regional centre devoted solely to fighting corruption, with the main task of improving regional efforts through various means, including: adopting and implementing international anti-corruption instruments and implementing regional agreements; promoting good governance; strengthening national legislation and promoting the rule of law; and promoting an active civil society and raising public awareness. It brings together governments of the region, local and international civil society organisations, bilateral aid agencies, and international organisations (Kostadinović, 2017; Prezelj, 2013).

### **Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI)**

MARRI, established in 2004, has been tasked with the creation of an integrated system of border traffic control in the Western Balkans. The objective of MARRI and its Centre is to contribute to the orderly and free movement of people in the interest of security and prosperity in the areas of: migration, asylum, integrated border management, visa policy and consular cooperation, return/settlement of refugees/displaced persons (Paszkievicz, 2009; Kostadinović, 2017).

The Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe, signed by Balkan countries in 2006, is designed to unify regulations for the border control and create a management system for wanted persons and objects (Paszkievicz, 2009; Kostadinović, 2017).

### **Southeast Europe Police Chiefs Association (SEPCA)**

SEPCA, formed in 2002, facilitates regional police cooperation among its members and supports the transformation and reform of police services to foster public security. One outcome of SEPCA is the creation of the Women Police Officer Networks (WPON) advancing women in police and gender mainstreaming of police practices. There is a Secretariat that follows the implementation of the Police Cooperation Convention, with the aim of police cooperation (e.g. joint threat analysis, hot pursuit, witness protection, cross-border surveillance, undercover and other forms of investigations (Güroff and Kazanxhi, 2016; Bechev et al., 2015).

## **Police Cooperation Centre (PCC)**

Joint cooperation centres can facilitate and strengthen cooperation among various actors. A trilateral Police Cooperation Centre (PCC), established in BiH, for example, facilitates cooperation among the border police of BiH, Serbia and Montenegro (IOM, 2015). In addition to being a mechanism for sharing and exchanging information, the PCC can facilitate the conduct of joint and coordinated operations between the agencies that participate in the centre. This could include, for example, joint patrolling conducted by law enforcement agencies from neighbouring countries or hot pursuit of a suspected case once he or she crosses the border. Such operations could help to prevent and detect the micro-organisations that run various illegal cross-border activities (IOM, 2015).

## **Southeast European Prosecutors Advisory Group (SEEPAG)**

SEEPAG, constituted in 2003, is a network of experienced prosecutors that provide legal assistance, advice and guidance to SEELAC in investigation of transborder organised crime. The network consists in National Prosecutorial Focal Points established in each member state with the task of facilitating judicial cooperation between member states. It enhances the cooperation and coordination between national investigating and prosecuting authorities. This allows law enforcement agencies to act more effectively when dealing with transborder crime and to bring criminals to justice faster. This can be through timely exchange of information and evidence, through formal MLA requests, or through more informal channels of communication.<sup>2</sup>

While the work of SEEPAG is financed by the United States, the Council of Europe supports the Western Balkans Prosecutor's Network. Greater coordination between the two regional initiatives for prosecutors' cooperation is required (Bechev et al., 2015).

## **The South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapon (SEESAC)**

SEESAC, established in 2002 as a joint initiative of the UNDP and the Regional Cooperation Council, is a focal point for activities related to small arms and light weapons (SALW) in the region. It works with national governments to adopt a holistic approach to SALW, implementing a wide range of activities. These include: campaigns of SALW awareness activities; development of open bilateral and multilateral channels of communication with all relevant stakeholders (e.g. through regional forums); collection of SALW; inventory management; enhanced monitoring and border control; and improved control of arms exports (Kostadinović, 2017; Bechev et al., 2015).

It has become a competent regional body and has developed a unique capacity and experience in implementing regional interventions with several governments, in line with the common policy in the region (Kostadinović, 2017; Bechev et al., 2015). It has been effective in reducing the indirect threat arising from the continued presence of weapons after the end of wars, including the threat of organised crime and terrorism in the Western Balkans and beyond (Prezelj, 2013).

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<sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.selec.org/about-seepag/>

## **Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG)**

The IISG, launched in 2017, is a new approach to internal security governance capacity-building and reform introduced in the Western Balkan. The concept enables a coordinated, aligned and sustainable effort in internal security governance reform on the part of the EU and all relevant international donors of external assistance (UNODC, 2019). It seeks to promote strategic guidance and coordination to regional operational law enforcement policy, aspects of which have already been supported by various donors (Đorđević et al., 2018).

There is wide support for the concept of the IISG as a potentially effective tools for regional coordination. Its work is promoting informal collaboration and trust-building among beneficiaries across the region. It works with police, prosecutors, joint investigation teams and other actors in security and justice (UNODC, 2019).

The IISG has paved the way for new policy solutions, such as an internal security policy cycle in the Western Balkans that is based on an understanding of the region's own ability to counter security challenges. The focus is more on truly efficient horizontal regional cooperation, rather than on joining Euro-Atlantic integrations and establishing vertical mechanisms of cooperation with the Western Balkans based on conditionality (Đorđević et al., 2018).

It was recently announced that the IISG has endorsed a functional merger with the RCC as of April 2020. This is expected to contribute to greater coherence in security cooperation activities of the region.<sup>3</sup>

## **Western Balkan Counter-Terrorism initiative (WBCTi)**

The WBCTi was initiated in 2015 to address deficiencies in combatting serious organised crime and gaps in regional cooperation mechanisms. Since mid-2014, the issue of counterterrorism has become central at the EU again and the Western Balkans has re-emerged as a key region in terms of security. The agenda has been pursued by numerous actors and donors and there have been problems with lack of coordination and complementarity and with duplications in efforts (Đorđević et al., 2018).

The initiative presents a joint, coordinated approach to regional cooperation in the region and seeks to integrate international assistance designed to raise the region's capacity to prevent and combat terrorism, violent extremism, and radicalisation leading to terrorism. It aims to minimise duplication and overlapping of actions of international actors by encouraging partners to consult with the tool before planning new activities and to jointly prioritise actions (UNODC, 2019; Đorđević et al., 2018). It adopts a multilevel policy coordination mechanism, which includes three levels of mutually linked and interoperable regional platforms: strategic policy level network, facilitated by the RCC; operational cooperation and response in police and intelligence services; and networks of police operatives engaging in cross-border operational cooperation (Đorđević et al., 2018). The multilevel platform has resulted in increased engagement with Europol and

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<sup>3</sup> RCC. (2019). Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG) Board has endorsed functional merger with the RCC as of April 2020. <https://berlinprocess.info/integrative-internal-security-governance-iisg-board-has-endorsed-functional-merger-with-the-rcc-as-of-april-2020/>

Interpol in efforts related to information exchange, threat assessment, and operational case analysis (Đorđević et al., 2018).

The initiative facilitates joint meetings of all relevant Western Balkan officials to provide information exchange and conduct coordination, exposing gaps and engaging all relevant levels to eliminate them. Joint meetings also promote sharing of expertise and good practice among regional partners and counterparts (Đorđević et al., 2018).

The WBCTi is considered to be an efficient form of regional security cooperation. It has contributed to a new security framework aimed at addressing complex regional security issues; linked the mandates and objectives of regional stakeholders; and enhanced communication and mutual trust between them at all levels of policy implementation. This complements the EU integration process (Đorđević et al., 2018). However, the WBCTi is an example of a locally driven initiative, which arose after beneficiary countries themselves voiced concerns and the need for such a mechanism. This was endorsed by several regional political frameworks. Only then did the EC become involved in support of it (Đorđević et al., 2018). Under the IISG mechanism, the WBCTi has extended to two other areas to internal security: the Western Balkan Counter-Serious Crime Initiative (WBCSCi) and the Western Balkan Border Security Initiative (WBBSi) (UNODC, 2019).

## The Horizontal Facility

The European Union/Council of Europe Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Turkey (Horizontal Facility II) 2019-2022 is a cooperation initiative of the European Union and Council of Europe for the Western Balkans and Turkey.<sup>4</sup> The first phase of the programme ran from 2016-2019. Themes covered by the Horizontal Facility include: ensuring justice; fighting economic crime; combating discrimination and protecting the rights of vulnerable groups; and freedom of expression and of the media. The Expertise Coordination Mechanism remains an important feature of the programme. It provides legislative expertise and policy advice aimed at addressing any shortcomings in the thematic areas covered. These shortcomings are identified by Council of Europe monitoring bodies.

Phase two of the programme will enhance the regional dimension, allowing for a cross-border exchange on addressing common problems, sharing best practices and establishing platforms and networks to address the issues.

## 6. Select challenges to regional cooperation

### Translating frameworks into action

The strategic documents of Western Balkan countries state that regional cooperation is essential to their national and overall regional security – and in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration (Jakešević, 2019). Some studies conducted on regional cooperation within the Western Balkans find, however, that cooperation in some fields of security lack coordination and efficiency, due in large part to low rates of implementation. In such contexts, cooperation remains primarily declaratory, without consistent implementation on the ground (Đorđević et al., 2018; Prezelj,

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/ankara/horizontal-facility-for-the-western-balkans-and-turkey>

2013). Cooperation in some areas of the police sector, for example, appear to have been adopted solely on paper, rather than in practical action (Knezović et al., 2018).

## **Trust issues**

Trust is of tremendous importance in the field of security (Knezović et al., 2018). A number of Western Balkan countries have experienced a shared conflicted past. In such a context, discussions of security and security sectors can frequently be fuelled by ethnic nationalism (Emini and Marku, 2019; Ademi, 2018). There is ongoing distrust among regional actors, including a lack of trust to share information in sensitive areas (Emini and Marku, 2019; Jakešević, 2019). This is a key obstacle in fostering transborder cooperation in the field of security (Emini and Marku, 2019; Ademi, 2018). Thus, regional initiatives are often more likely to be effective if they involve joint work in a less sensitive field of action and/or at a relatively low level (Emini and Marku, 2019).

## **Security community and regional identity**

A “security community” – an enhanced sense of cooperation, trust and reciprocity, among and between countries, is recognised as essential for maintaining peace (Cruise and Grillot, 2013). Members of a security community view each other as partners, which tends to minimise the prospect of violent conflict. While research on the Western Balkans has often focused on elite-level, government to government cooperation, the development of a security community must extend to the public-level. Public-level security community can be inconsistent, or in some areas, entirely lacking (Cruise and Grillot, 2013). A study of the police sector in Croatia finds, for example, that it is difficult to detect all the indicators that would demonstrate the existence of a security community in the Western Balkans. While there were compatibilities in terms of values and mutual responsiveness, a generalized common identity, a sense of “we-ness” feeling for the region, and loyalty is lacking (Knezović et al., 2018).

A weak sense of regional identity, despite geographic proximity, common history, cultural and social cohesiveness and common problems of transition, have contributed to poor levels of regional ownership and undermines regional cooperation (Prezelj, 2013; Kušljugić, 2009).

For further discussion, see: Building public community level trust and cooperation in the Select recommendations section.

## **Varying levels of development**

Differences in progress made by the individual states in the Western Balkans in their integration processes and in their implementation of international norms and standards is an obstacle to regional cooperation. For example, by becoming an EU member state, Croatia was obligated to adopt particular standards of border control, which have not yet been adopted by other countries in the region. These can undermine the cooperation of border police among neighbouring countries (Knezović et al., 2018). Some countries in the region have also not passed particular information security laws, which creates serious difficulties in processes of cooperation with Croatia or other EU member states that have adopted such laws and normative requirements (Knezović et al., 2018).

## 7. Select recommendations

### Training

Security sector-related agencies urgently need new training methods that can provide them with new skills and cutting-edge technologies; and new organisational structures that can foster changes in mentality. This is essential for dealing with complex, transborder security problems and in enhancing inter-agency, bilateral and multilateral cooperation (Dokos, 2017). At the same time, it is important to recognise that police, prosecutors and other security and justice officials in the Western Balkans have much expertise, which can be relied upon in designing training activities (UNODC, 2019).

### Interactions and sharing of experiences

It is important to continue to develop inter-institutional cooperation within and among states by sharing and exchanging good practices and experience (Bačanović and Hristovski, 2018). Such sharing of experiences and interactions should also take place at the public level – between independent professionals – academics or civil society actors (Emini and Marku, 2019). This can be particularly important in cases where bilateral cooperation on the state level is almost non-existent, such as in the case of Kosovo, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Emini and Marku, 2019). It can also help to foster a greater sense of security community (see the Challenges section above).

### Building trust and a security community

Efforts need to be made to address distrust among populations and to foster a shared sense of identity, in order to promote a security community among citizens and to enhance regional cooperation (Cruise and Grillot, 2013). (See the Security community and regional identity section under Challenges).

Given the existing interaction between governing officials, even between the officials of countries with long standing disputes such as Serbia and Croatia, elites are well placed to encourage and foster security community among the public. Governments should encourage and foster greater interaction within and among their populations. This could be through support for local programmes that encourage partnership and interactions between countries or ethnic groups (Cruise and Grillot, 2013). Media campaigns that promote commonality and solicit cooperation among the citizens of the region can also be an effective tool to foster a regional identity (Cruise and Grillot, 2013). International actors can also continue to play a role in funding and supporting local community development projects that aim to bridge ethnic and country divides through increased interaction and programming (Cruise and Grillot, 2013).

### Contact person/coordination unit

Establishing or strengthening the role of national authorised contact persons or units (to address the issue of turnover) for cooperation and information exchange could help to improve internal cooperation in a country in combating organised crime (IOM, 2015). Each institution involved, for example, in the identification and investigation of human trafficking and migrant smuggling cases (law enforcement agencies, prosecutors' office, labour inspection etc.) should appoint an authorised officer or unit responsible for cooperation with other bodies and operators to function properly (IOM, 2015).



In order to strengthen transborder exchanges of information, each country in the region could also appoint contact persons or units in order to manage the international flow of information and coordination of joint regional and multilateral activities. All information and activities conducted by any national actor within the scope of regional cooperation would go through the contact person or unit (IOM, 2015). This is the case, for example, with the Western Balkan Counter-Terrorism initiative (see Mechanisms and initiatives section), whereby partners are encouraged to consult with the tool before planning new activities.

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