

# Chapter 2

## Territorial Development and Governance in the Western Balkans



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**Abstract** The last three decades have seen the Western Balkan Region facing several institutional, economic, social, and territorial transformation. Since the early 1990s, the region has undergone radical changes that have paved the way for a diversity of territorial development models. This chapter identifies and details the main territorial challenges and drivers of change that characterise the region and could affect its future development. To do so, it proposes an historical analysis of the region's spatial development trajectories, focussing on the role of territorial governance and spatial planning in addressing them and identifying the main challenges that hamper this activity. Finally, particular attention is dedicated to the role that international actors have played and are still playing in shaping territorial development and governance in the region.

**Keywords** Western Balkan Region · Territorial development · Governance · Spatial planning · EU integration · International actors

### 2.1 Introduction

The last three decades have seen the Western Balkan Region facing several institutional, economic, social, and territorial transformations, as a consequence of the transition period and the European Union (EU) integration process. For more than 45 years, the Balkans suffered from self-isolation that made the region one of the poorest areas of the European continent in terms of economic performance, territorial development, and human capacity. The downfall of the communist (Albania) and socialist (Yugoslavia) regimes has paved the way for the introduction of

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numerous reforms in the public and private domain. Reforms have been quite frequent and often supported by international actors that have been active since the first period of transition. Institutional actors have influenced how territorial development has been addressed, or at least tried to, by promoting a series of reforms in the domain of territorial governance and spatial planning. In this regard, this chapter aims at exploring the main development challenges and drivers of change by proposing a series of spatial, economic, and territorial considerations.

The chapter is composed of five main sections. After this brief introduction, the main spatial development trends that characterised the region since the beginning of the twentieth century until nowadays are presented, from the pre-war period to the transition period. It shows how the political systems and territorial development trajectories interlinked path dependently. The third section reflects on the role played by territorial governance and spatial planning in the region. By analysing its evolution from an historical and institutional perspective, the chapter shows how the question of territorial development, and territorial governance and spatial planning, has been addressed and which kind of conditions and contingencies (external and internal) there have been. Here the role of international actors is analysed, and the prominent role played by the EU is highlighted. On this basis, the fourth section presents the main challenges that the region is currently faced with. The nature of these challenges is multidimensional and ever-evolving, dealing with a number of issues like urbanisation processes, territorial disparities, preservation of natural resources as well as globalisation trends and impacts. Finally, the chapter is rounded off by a number of conclusive remarks that summarise its main messages, in so doing setting ground for the following chapters.

## **2.2 Socio-economic and Territorial Development in the Western Balkan Region**

Territorial development in the Western Balkan Region has been characterised by its turbulent historical path and territorial disputes since the beginning of the twentieth century. This section aims at setting the context and establishing some historical trends useful for understanding the evolutionary patterns of territorial development and governance (see Table 2.1). To do that, the section is divided into three parts. The first reflects on the situation of the pre (until 1945) and communist regime (from 1945 to 1989), giving a brief overview on the particular geopolitical implications that dominated the region in that period (among others, wars, economic crises, migration fluxes, and ethnic contrapositions). Moreover, it recognises the importance of the Soviet Era and its effects on the region, focussing on how the socialist and communist ideology has been interpreted in Yugoslavia and Albania and how its different interpretation has influenced each domestic context. The second gives a preliminary understanding of the transition path that has been

**Table 2.1** Main historical periods and territorial governance implications

Period	Main historical events	Territorial governance implications
Until 1945	Political instability	Embryonal and fragmented (urban) planning activities
From 1945 to 1989	Socialist (Yugoslavia) and communist (Albania) system	Centralised territorial governance and spatial planning mechanisms aimed at the implementation of economic planning
1989–2000	Transition to market economy	Territorial governance in standby; proliferation of illegal practices
2000–ongoing	EU integration	Introduction and consolidation of transnational territorial governance paradigms

Source Authors' own elaboration

highlighted through the examination of the main economic and political drivers of change and their spatial implications, while the third introduces the most recent development trends and their territorial repercussions.

### ***2.2.1 From the Beginning of the Century Until 1989***

The pre-communist period in the Western Balkan Region was characterised by uninterrupted political instability. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Balkan Wars (1912–1913) and the First World War (1914–1918) changed the configuration of the countries' borders, paving the way for the establishment of new regional power entities such as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Observing the demographic variation, the internal and external migration flux represented one of the main features of the new countries. Economically speaking, the consequences had been catastrophic for many countries: immense loss of labour force, low productive agriculture, and relatively small industry capacity have contributed to induce the region in a deep economic crisis (Innerhofer 2017). Despite some economic progresses, the Balkans remained among the poorest regions in Europe, with great internal disparities. To overcome those regional economic disadvantages, a series of reforms were launched, such as the agrarian reform and the monetary policy reform, but they did not produce any important effect. Despite the attempt to rehabilitate their economies, each country showed great economic and social limits that increased in the aftermath of the WWII.

After 1945, while Eastern and South-Eastern European adhered to a Soviet-style economic model based on central planning, rapid industrialisation, and collectivised agriculture, in the Western Balkan Region, the circumstances were different. On one side, Yugoslavia pursued the ambition to introduce a self-management doctrine, a combination economy based on elements derived from the planned economy and the market; on the other side, Albania introduced a communist system based on the Stalinist doctrine. In 1961, Albania abandoned the Warsaw Pact as a

consequence of the Sino-Soviet split and left the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance in 1962, two steps towards a complete isolation from the other European countries. At the same time, Yugoslavia continued to relate with the Soviet bloc, while establishing trade treaties with the European Economic Community (EEC).

Despite being part of the Western Balkan Region as a geographic context, the socio-economic and political situations of Yugoslavia and Albania differed considerably. Yugoslavia was ruled by a socialist regime with specific characteristics in terms of (i) population—a wide ethnic heterogeneity featuring different languages and different religions; (ii) administrative structure—the adoption of a federal structure in the republics (Croatia, Macedonia, Slovenia, and Serbia) and autonomous areas (District of Kosovo—Metohija and Autonomous Province of Vojvodina); (iii) economy—it had retained a large private sector in its economy (agricultural area). Meanwhile, the Albanian regime followed the Stalinist approach characterised by a top-down state control over property of land, economic activities, and means of production. On the contrary, the Yugoslav system became highly devolved and polycentric, and decisions were taken by the central, the republican, and the communal branches of the government, and by individual enterprises. Indeed, Tito encouraged the private sector supported foreign economic relations with the Western markets (but also with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank). Nevertheless, marked regional disparities increased between the most-developed republics (Croatia and Slovenia) and the least developed (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo).

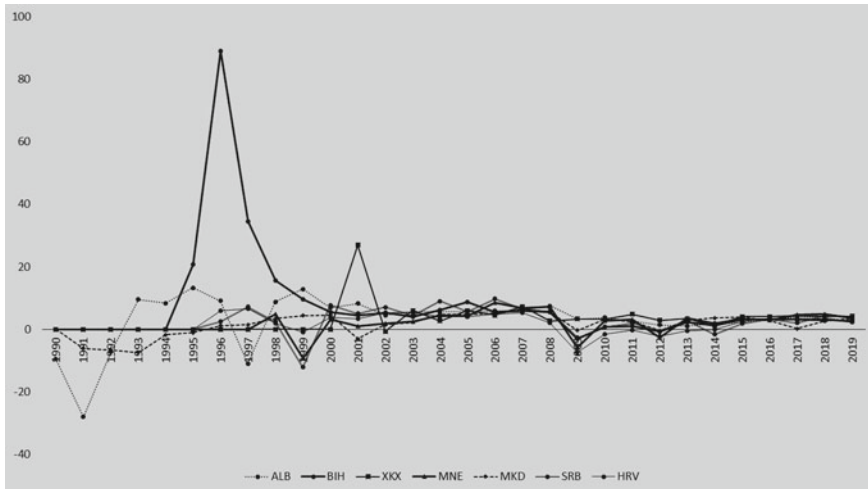
### ***2.2.2 The Transition Period***

In 1989, after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the socialist countries had to choose their ways towards democratisation and free market economy, a period that is generally referred to as “transition” (Cotella 2007). Aiming at having a better understanding of the transitional path followed by each country, it has been considered necessary to recognise how the phenomenon has been interpreted by the literature in the last twenty-five years and applied to the Western Balkan context. On this matter, Elster et al. (1998) identified mainly two modes of collapse that consisted in a peaceful civil pattern or a violent and military path, while Kitschelt et al. (1999) focussed their attention on the types of communist regimes, identifying two general attitudes: one centred on the cult of the personality and a more bureaucratic and authoritarian system. These studies have been focussing on the divergent patterns of change in the post-communist trajectory in Eastern Europe, including the former Yugoslavia and Albania. Based on their studies, Elster et al. (1998) affirmed that in the Western Balkans’ post-communist experience, the collapse of the regimes has been followed by the paths mentioned above, both peaceful and violent. Accordingly, the communist collapse in Yugoslavia was characterised by a violent mechanism of change that caused several tensions to follow one another for more than ten years, while Albania witnessed a relatively peaceful

transition period. These factors concurred to influence the undertaken institutional, administrative, and market reforms, as well as defining international relations during the post-communist reorganisation. In those circumstances, with important differences for each country, these factors influenced the orientation of the institutional choices promoted by the reforming elites. From an economic reform perspective, the state transformation regarding the economic transition allowed moving from a more centred-planned growth system to an open-based market. In this respect, the period from 1990 to 2000 has characterised by an increasing of macroeconomic reforms that have introduced changes in terms of property by supporting of the privatisation state own activities and the establishing of economic models by promoting the liberalisation of production assets and the breaking up of state economic assets. Moreover, the new reform circumstance asked for an institutional reforming process, which tried to introduce a series of decentralisation mechanisms that allocated a series of responsibilities to the locale level. Even not enough investigated, the process of decentralisation has drastically influenced administrative system influencing so territorial governance and spatial planning, as will see.

However, until now, the majority of studies about the Western Balkan Regions have generally referred to the economic aspect of the transformation although it represents only a partial aspect of the transition process. Indeed, Balkans countries were interested by a profound internal and external migration fluxes which have increased the development towards certain parts of its territory (i.e. capital cities, for instance) pressure while society's expectations changed according to the new opportunities offered by the free market economy model. While the modernisation of the entire state system was certainly necessary, this did not prevent from the coming up of negative externalities. Indeed, the "shock therapy" has drastically decreased the GDP performance of almost all countries (see Fig. 2.1). Even more important, the welfare system was dismantled as well as any social-oriented policy. Apart from that, there were growing socio-economic dichotomies like underdevelopment, peripherality–rurality, and economic dependence, increasing of corruption and the emerging of various forms of illegal activities (e.g. informal building, for instance).

Even not with the same magnitude in each country, all those socio-economic changes have influenced the way of territorial governance and spatial planning were conducted. From a territorial and institutional development and perspective, indeed, the most important change concerns the shift from government to governance, reflected in the new structure based on the interaction among a multitude of local and regional actors (Tsenkova and Nedovic-Budic 2006), which were mainly the result of the decentralisation process (Berisha 2018a). The new circumstances led not only to new institutions, but also to a new notion of territorial governance and planning that focusses on regaining its legitimacy and adapts to the new socio-economic and political mechanisms. The shift from government to governance was compatible with new demands on spatial planning and policy. This process of transformation was granted to introduce new principles associated with good governance: participation and consensus building; strategic direction and



**Fig. 2.1** Countries' GDP growth performance 1990–2018 (*Source* Authors' own elaboration based on DataBank—<https://databank.worldbank.org/home.aspx>)

vision; performance, accountability and transparency (Graham et al. 2003). In the context of the states' transformation, from one system to another, the role of spatial planning in the free market system drastically changed compared to the communist ideology approach. In fact, in state communism, action was based on planning and the party's monopoly on power and decision-making. In capitalist societies, instead, markets prevail, exercising innovativeness, attention to the social consensus, and economic activity independently from collectively reached decisions and approvals (Tsenkova and Nedovic-Budic 2006).

### 2.2.3 *The Turbulent Path Towards the EU*

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the Western Balkan countries started to be involved, at different pace, in the EU Integration process. The Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP<sup>1</sup>) has been launched in 1999, as a first step along the way of the integration path. Since then, the countries' EU Integration performance varied. While Croatia joined the EU in 2013, the rest of the countries are still

<sup>1</sup>The SAP framework is based on six key areas: (i) the development of existing economic and trade relations with and within the region; (ii) the development and partial redirection of existing economic and financial assistance; (iii) the increasing of role of civil society, education, and institution building; (iv) the cooperation in areas of justice and home affair; (v) the development of political dialogue; (vi) the launching of the Stabilisation Association Agreement (European Commission 1999).

dealing with structural reforms in order to align their systems to the EU requirements. However, since the beginning of the economic crisis of 2008 and the emerging of different orientations about the necessity to reconsider the EU enlargement process, the integration path seems to be more difficult than in the past. Countries are now trying to make structural reforms in order to better perform to convince on the one side the EU counterparts, but in the meantime are looking for potential economic and geopolitical alternatives. In this way, in the last decades, the role of non-European countries has been growing. In particular, Russia, Turkey, and China are investing a significant amount of resources in the region by obtaining important political endorsement. Despite that, the EU and European countries are still playing a central role in the region. For example, since the introduction of the first (2017–2013) and second (2014–2020) generation of IPA, the EU has invested more than 23 billion of euro in the region (Berisha and Cotella 2019; Pinnavaia and Berisha, in this volume) making it the most generous actor in the region. Spatial integration, connectivity, cross-border, and transnational cooperation are the key themes around which each domestic political agenda is built. Despite that, however, there are a number of challenges that require more interconnections in terms of political will that interest both countries as well as the EU.

From a territorial perspective, the recent development trends and trajectories are slowly changing also how territorial governance and spatial planning have been perceived until now. More than a purely technical instruments, territorial governance and spatial planning are becoming the way to sustainably address the territorial development by dealing with multidimensional issues like flexible processes, inclusive procedures, multi-level coordination, and strategic and future-oriented approaches (Toto and Shutina, in this volume). To deal with such complexity, Croatia, for instance, has developed a parallel system where spatial planning and regional development can easily be interconnected in each administrative level. This of course requires the introduction of new territorial governance models not anymore guided by normative and regulative logics, but instead identifying all-inclusive and integrated approaches that may facilitate the overall implementation of plans and strategies.

### **2.3 Territorial Governance Between Path Dependency and International Influences**

Territorial governance and spatial planning models reflect the institutional, social, economic, and territorial contexts where they operate. It means that contextual conditions influence how territorial governance and spatial planning are conceptualised and implemented. In the context like the Western Balkan Region, territorial governance and spatial planning have undergone several, often drastic, transformations. These transformations concern (Janin Rivolin 2012): (i) how the discourses around those notions are framed, hence culturally linked to the context;

(ii) the system as a set of norms, rules, laws, and administrative arrangement; (iii) the instruments adopted, and (iv) the practices, hence the ways of territorial planning and spatial planning are addressed. In each country, territorial governance and spatial planning have changed from a more regulative and legally oriented to a more strategic and integrated approach. This paradigmatic shift has been driven by both contextual needs but also as a consequence of external stimuli (Fig. 2.2). In order to understand current tendencies and possible future trends, the following parts explore the main path-dependant logics and attitudes as well as the most relevant international influences.

### 2.3.1 *The Role of Local Path Dependency*

Territorial governance and spatial planning are the result of the unstable interaction of external and internal forces (Berisha 2018a). This interaction combines external influences with the emergence or persistence of internal priorities, logics, culture, and hegemonic power mechanisms. Together they constitute the main contextual conditions where territorial governance and spatial planning are framed and operate.

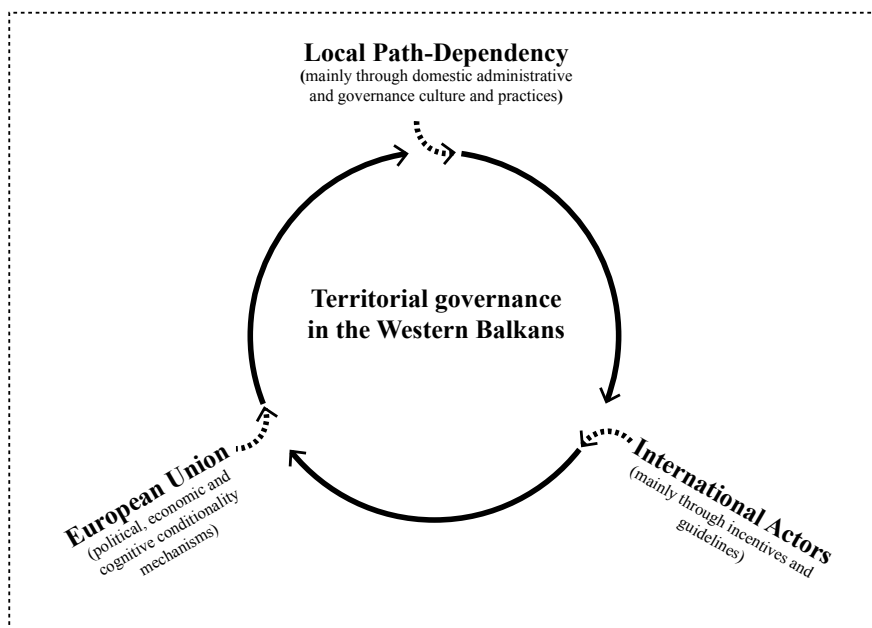
In the Balkans, during the first decade of the transition process, spatial planning was seen as a purely technical tool inherited from the previous regime (Cotella and Berisha, 2016a, b). Since the 2000s, however, it has changed into a more integrated and decentralised activity, characterised by a set of mechanisms aiming at properly addressing territorial development (Berisha and Pinnavaia 2018a, b; Berisha et al., in this volume).<sup>2</sup> Historically, the initial period of the post-socialist transition of the 1990s in most countries of the region was characterised by an unstable, unregulated, and often unequal institutional framework. According to Hirt and Stanilov (2009, p. 4), this *institutional vacuum* was dominated by private economic interests and market mechanisms strongly linked to the political establishment.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, many regulations lacked sufficient legal power or clarity about the mechanisms of policy implementation. Overall, the transition was predominantly characterised by capital struggles that manifested through the accumulation of, and grab for, resources, with urban land being a major target in this process (Vujošević 2003). Within this complex framework, the privatisation of land, housing, and means of production in Albania and almost all public housing stock in the former Yugoslavia took place (Hirt and Stanilov 2009). At the same time, encroachment on public space and illegal construction rose substantially (Berisha et al. 2018, 2020).<sup>4</sup> In the ex-Yugoslavian countries, this phenomenon worsened due to the social

<sup>2</sup>However, not all countries have followed the same path, and some exceptions persist: Montenegro, for instance, with its new law of 2019 has recentralized its system to a full extent.

<sup>3</sup>As studied by the authors elsewhere, this stands true for the majority of transition countries (Adams et al. 2011; Cotella 2014).

<sup>4</sup>For example, by the mid-2000s, there were 127 officially recognised informal settlements throughout Albania, which covered 3,200 km<sup>2</sup> (1,143 km<sup>2</sup> in urban areas) (Požani 2013).





**Fig. 2.2** Concurring influences on Western Balkans' territorial governance (*Source* Authors' own elaboration)

consequences of the war and, in particular, the increasing demand for housing by refugees and internally displaced persons (Žegarac 1999). At the same time, Albania remained stuck with socialist procedures in obtaining building permits and intensified rural–urban migration that overwhelmed the capital city of Tirana, with 25 per cent of informal housing being developed during the 1990s (Deda and Tsenkova 2006). In Serbia, over 1.5 million illegally built properties (including extensions) have been reported, while in Croatia the number of registered informal housing units stands at over 800,000 (UNECE 2012).

The turn of the millennium brought a renewed enthusiasm for the transition to democracy, economic liberalisation, marketisation, and political decentralisation. This was also a consequence of the normalisation of the geopolitical tensions that had characterised the previous decade. In this circumstances, most of the countries reformed and/or amended their legislative frameworks for territorial governance and spatial planning multiple times because of the growing influence of globalisation factors and the EU integration mechanisms. In addition, significant efforts were made in the attempt to accelerate the procedures of delivering construction permits, introducing some elements of flexibility to adapt to administrative and institutional reorganisation of the new contingencies. Moreover, various countries have introduced legislative procedures for the recognition of informal development practices.

### 2.3.2 *The Influence of the EU Integration Process*

While evolving path dependently, institutions are also subject to the influence of international actors and processes, among which the integration into the EU plays a particularly relevant role (Cotella and Stead 2011; Cotella and Janin Rivolin 2015). Since the end of the Cold War and the increasing importance of the EU in the region, a set of regulations, strategies, and visions have influenced the evolution of territorial governance and spatial planning in the various Western Balkan countries.

In Albania, for example, the Europeanisation of territorial governance and spatial planning interests several dimensions. While the transposition of EU legislation initially interested the upgrading of the existing rules and norms in several sectors, and in particular in the fields of energy, environment and transport. In turn, this led to the introduction of new instruments and procedures, like the environmental impact assessment and strategic environment assessment. When it comes to national strategies and guidelines, document produced at the EU level, such as the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), exerted an important impact on domestic spatial planning discourses. Concepts such as polycentric development, subsidiarity, rural development, integrated transport, and conservation of natural and cultural heritage progressively entered the Albanian policy-making arenas (Berisha 2018a, b; Allkja and Tavanxhiu 2016). However, as it has happened in other contexts (Cotella 2014; Cotella et al. 2012; Adams et al. 2014), these notions were often misinterpreted, poorly contextualised or just mentioned rhetorically (Berisha 2018a).

In Croatia, since the early 2000s, there has been a discussion on the impact of the EU logics in addressing territorial development policies. For instance, the Physical Planning Act approved in 2013 introduced a new generation of documents that aimed at a stronger sustainability approach inspired by EU mainstream development strategies. One should stress that in Croatia, due to its membership status, the EU impact is deeper than in candidate and potential candidate countries, with the country that has been exposed to the full influence of the EU legislation package. In particular, the environment legislation has been very influential for territorial governance and spatial planning since it has drastically altered processes and priorities. Similarly, the EU energy package and the Trans European Network framework have affected both spatial plans and the Croatian regional development policy. An important role in shaping the Croatian spatial planning landscape has also been played by the EU cohesion policy and the pre-accession and neighbourhood policy, with programmes like PHARE, ISPA, SAPARD, CARDS, IPA<sup>5</sup> etc.

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<sup>5</sup>In 2007, the EU launched the financial programme IPA—Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance—that replaced previous programmes like the Poland and Hungary Assistance for the Restructuring of the Economy, Cross-Border Cooperation (PHARE), PHARE CBC, Structural Policies for Pre-Accession (ISPA), Special Accession Programme for Rural and Development Programme (SAPARD), and the Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation (CARDS).

Even though not with the same intensity, also in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EU contributed to influence the evolution of territorial governance and spatial planning. As recognised by the Ministry of Physical Planning, Construction and Environment of the Republika Srpska, the transposition of the so-called *acquis communautaire*, especially in the field of planning and construction, led to an improvement of domestic regulations, strengthened the institutional framework devoted to land use and promoted a more sustainable use of resources (MPPCE 2013). Moreover, the EU contributed to the establishment of cooperation initiatives between the Republic Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the field of spatial planning. Similar to the case of Croatia, also in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the environmental legislation has been crucial, as well as the laws on natural protection that instituted for the first time the Natura 2000 network under which three national parks have been created. Moreover, the so-called European programming period approach influenced the temporal framing of domestic strategies and programmes and their increasingly strategic nature. Finally, there is a tendency to promote the integrated approach that has contributed to transform the sectoral perspective to a more adequate cross-sectoral one. However, as stated by Marjanovic (2017), despite partial efforts to understand and systematise the EU influences can be identified, the European spatial discourse has been introduced to domestic planning cultures only superficially and mostly to ensure formal compliance: most of the adopted concepts, in the practice, are often negatively stigmatised as “external imported” (Djurasic and Knieling 2015).

Other countries have been experiencing differential Europeanisation influences. In Serbia, the influence of the EU is particularly evident in the country’s attitude to cooperation with neighbourhoods in both cross-border and transnational programmes. Differently from the past, when cooperation was mainly focussed on the former Yugoslavia sphere, currently Serbia is trying to widen its cooperation action towards other countries and territories (Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, 2018). However, also here the impact of the EU is partly limited by contextual and path-dependent elements, among which the attitude of practitioners seems to be reluctant to external stimuli (Berisha et al. 2020). This is slowly changing thanks to the introduction of the Spatial Plan of the Republic of Serbia, which takes inspiration from and defines its spatial priorities according to the goals developed in the Lisbon and Gothenburg strategy, the Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities, and the Territorial Agenda of the European Union. Similar experiences have taken place also in North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo\*,<sup>6</sup> with the three countries that are slowly developing cross-border initiatives under the EU umbrella, in the field of environment, transport, and energy. Overall, one could argue that domestic contexts are slowly aligning their territorial governance models as a consequence of a number of concepts and way of doing things that are defined at the EU level, in so doing contributing to bridging at least partly the historical gap that has characterised the region.

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<sup>6</sup>(\*) 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.

### 2.3.3 *The Influence of Other International Actors*

Beside the role played by the EU, a number of other international players contributed to influence the evolution of territorial governance in the countries of the Western Balkan Region. Among them, it is possible to distinguish between (i) international organisations (United Nation Development Programme UNDP, UN-Habitat, World Bank, etc.) and (ii) development cooperation agencies like United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the Swiss Development Agency (SDC), and the Austrian Development Agency (ADA). Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Western Balkan Region has become one of the hottest spots where the role of the international community has been crucial in terms of humanitarian aid, democratisation, and economic and institutional restructuring. While at the beginning, the main international efforts were devoted to the implementation of emergency initiatives, with the progressive normalisation, later their priority moved towards institutional and socio-economic restructuring.

Each country with its own pace has been interested by a number of initiatives, programmes, and projects concerning in one way or another the other territorial governance. For instance, the UNDP active in the region since the early 1990s supported the Albanian government through technical support aimed at the transposition and implementation of the EU environmental requirements, as well as at the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals launched by the United Nation (2000). At the same time, the programme has also supported Croatian local communities in the reform of several sectors such as local agriculture, environment, and energy.<sup>7</sup> In Bosnia and Herzegovina, UNDP engaged with both the central and the local level (UNDP 2009). At the central level, it favoured public administration training and human resource management, ICT development and e-Governance, and war-related justice and advocacy towards reconciliation. At the municipal level, activities included the support for returnees and displaced people, local governance, and economic development. UN-Habitat has been particularly active in Kosovo, assisting the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning in drafting the Law on Spatial Planning (2003) (Westermann 2018). Among other initiatives, in 2002, it also initiated the Urban Planning and Management Programme co-financed by the Dutch international cooperation budget, which focussed on institutional capacity building and favoured the establishment of a Central Institute for Spatial Planning.

Together with UN agencies, also the World Bank contributed to the territorial development in the majority of countries. In particular, in Montenegro, it played a prominent role in the liberalisation and transformation of the system towards a

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<sup>7</sup>A number of projects were launched, facilitating the compliance to EU requirements. For instance, the ARCH-Vukovar project (2011–2013) aimed at promoting the economic and human development and fostering interethnic reconciliation by restoring the most symbolic monument of the urban historical centres.

market economy through a number of financial initiatives. One of the last active programmes is the Institutional Development and Agriculture Strengthening, aiming at enhancing institutional capacity to manage public funds dedicated to agricultural support in the implementation of the Instrument for Pre-Accession and Assistance for Rural Development (IPARD). Similarly, in Macedonia, the World Bank has been historically engaged in the promotion of infrastructure initiatives thanks to the implementation of instruments like the Regional and Local Programme Support Projects (2008), the Energy Infrastructure Improvement Project (2011), the Road Upgrading and Development Project (2015), and the National and Regional Roads Rehabilitation project (2017). Finally, in Albania, it financed the Land Administration and Management Project (LAMP 2008–2011), assisting local administration in the development new spatial planning documents.<sup>8</sup>

A series of national development agencies have been operating in the region since 1990. The USAID in particular has been active since 1990 by assisting local authorities in several fields from humanitarian emergencies to economic restructuring, from state reforms to macroeconomic stabilisation. In Albania, the USAID has launched and partially implemented the Planning and Local Government Project (2012–2019), aiming at strengthening the capabilities of local governments to plan and manage urban and regional growth (USAID 2016). In Croatia, it supported the local community in several fields like agricultural production and the development of farmer organisations and NGOs networks and activities. At the same time, it helped the country with strategic planning in support of local economic development, citizen participation, management of information systems, transparency in budgeting and local governmental reform. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the USAID played an important role in the field of spatial planning, by financing two rounds of the so-called Governance Accountability Project (2004–2007 and 2007–2012), aimed at a more participatory, inclusive, and democratic society as well as at municipal action planning, financial management, and urban planning. Following these programmes, the methodological approach to land use zoning was reformed, including important changes in the release of building permits (GAP 2012).

Similar approaches have been adopted by other agencies. As mentioned in the Sustainable and Integrated Urban Development Strategy produced by Serbia in 2018, for instance, the GIZ has been responsible for strengthening of local management in the country, as well as for the introduction of a more integrated approach to local urban development. In addition, the GIZ has been responsible for launching the project integrated sustainable development of the southern coastal region of Albania (2015–2019), with special attention to rural tourism, the Climate Change Adaptation in Western Balkans (2012–2021) and the development of an analytical and methodological framework to fight illegal developments in Montenegro. Other

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<sup>8</sup>The project allowed eight municipalities to draft local plans by dealing with: (i) security of tenure and registration of immovable property rights; (ii) urban land management; (iii) municipal infrastructure, and (iv) emergency response.

important agencies are the SDC, which launched in Albania a series of Decentralisation and Local Development Programmes, the ADA, that supported the development of stronger regions to advance their potentials, and the SIDA, that in Croatia has been engaged in supporting and encouraging local communities towards the EU membership route. The latter, in particular, focussed its efforts on (i) democracy, good governance and gender; (ii) natural resource and environmental protection; (iii) economic growth, and (iv) social development. In Kosovo its activities supported, among others, the preparation the Kosovo Environmental Strategy 2005–2010 and of the Kosovo Environmental Action Plan 2006–2010, that aligned the country to the EU's environmental requirements (SIDA 2007).

One should conclude mentioning that, overall, the involvement of international actors and, in turn, their influence on domestic contexts, varied in relation to their strategic agenda (some agencies are more economic development oriented, others more focussed on helping the countries to join the EU and others again in developing urban and regional plans and strategies) as well as to the period of action—at the beginning of transition, the majority of efforts were dedicated to humanitarian activities, to then shift towards social and environmental issues (Berisha 2018a).

## 2.4 Present and Future Territorial Development Challenges

Despite the mentioned reforms in the field of territorial development and governance, the present and future of the Western Balkans countries continue to be faced with a number of internal and external territorial challenges. Internally, demographic trends certainly will have impacts on spatial development, calling in the meantime for strategies and measures aimed at the preservation of biodiversity and natural resources. Externally, the main territorial challenges will relate to the impact of globalisation issues and trends as well as the schedule of the EU integration process.

More in detail, an urgent issue to deal with relates to the demographic changes and, in particular, to the increasing outmigration and its consequences: brain drain, a progressively ageing population and the further depopulation of inner areas. Though not immediately perceived as challenging issues, all the countries are suffering from internal and external migration fluxes, which are emptying some already depressed areas in favour of more developed regions. The population of the Western Balkan countries is expected to decrease by about 14% between 2018 and 2050 (Bankwatch Network 2016). This new demographic reconfiguration will bring with it increasing development pressure on cities and metropolitan areas, whereas nowadays the region features only two metropolitan areas with more than 1 million of inhabitant (Belgrade and Zagreb), a series of cities are nowadays suffering development stress (e.g. the Tirana-Durrës metropolitan area and the cities of Sarajevo, Skopje and Pristina). Due to the gateway role they play, the attractiveness of these urban areas is increasing exponentially, depriving the surrounding territories of human and economic resources. The challenge here concerns how to

address territorial development in a more polycentric direction without, however, having additional impacts on land use and the overexploitation of natural resources (Solly et al. 2020, 2021). Internal and external migration movements are reinforcing these trends, altering the traditional urbanisation model, which is per se rather balanced, polymorphic, and heterogeneous (Rácz 2014). More in particular, the Western Balkans population is becoming increasingly urban (World Bank 2019).<sup>9</sup> The main negative sides of the growing urbanisation trends are the increasing development pressure that characterise the coastal areas of the Adriatic Sea, growing urban sprawl and multiplication of illegal development activities.

Additional challenges concern the increasing territorial disparities that characterise the region. This phenomenon is partly path-dependent, and due to regional contingencies like political isolation and ethnic conflicts, which have made cross-border cooperation difficult. The growth of capital cities or functional areas is limiting the potential development of peripheral inner areas, which are slowly emptying. As the World Bank (2019) argues, all the countries in the region feature entrenched lagging areas. These territorial disparities are reflected also in terms of job opportunities, GDP per capita, consumption capacity, and income per capita.<sup>10</sup> The rural-to-urban ratio in mean income or consumption per capita is around 70–80% in most countries in the region, with North Macedonia and Serbia that presents the highest values among Europe and Central Asia countries (World Bank 2019). It is not surprising that the most lagging and deprived areas in the region are clustered around the Croatian–Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia–Kosovo, and Kosovo–Montenegro–Albania borders. To limit as much as possible the growing trend of such territorial disparities, countries are invited to invest more in accessibility and connectivity, through multi-modal transport system and networking, as well as in promoting soft and hard industries and high-specialised productive districts. For the former, it is important to develop a more inter- and trans-connected region which means improving internal and external connectivity, since the Western Balkans area is one of the most isolated regions in Europe, featuring very few international airports and underdeveloped highway and railway infrastructures.

Particular concerns are also related to the endangering of natural resources and biodiversity. The Western Balkan Region area is characterised by a variety of natural and ecological assets. It features high levels of biodiversity that is further amplified by the coexistence of three biogeographic regions—Continental, Alpine and Mediterranean—all presenting distinctive characteristics. This richness, however, is endangered by the progressive alteration of natural habitats by human activity, the impacts of climate change, and the scarce coordination of conservation and preservation initiatives taken until now. Similarly, the growing tourism industry

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<sup>9</sup>Albania moved from the 36% of urban population in 1990 to more than 60% in 2018. In the same period, Montenegro went from the 48% to the 66.7%. Also Bosnia and Herzegovina, that remains one of the most rural countries of the European continent, saw its share of urban population raising from 39% in 1990 to 48% in 2018.

<sup>10</sup>The gap in mean income or consumption per capita between the poorest and richest regions in a country reaches 50% in Albania, 38% in North Macedonia, and 33% in Serbia.



is generating a number of negative externalities, mostly in relation to the overexploitation of natural resources and the endangerment of important ecological areas, and the overuse of services during the summer season. The risk of overexploitation of natural resources and the loss of biodiversity are real and require drastic and coordinated policy interventions: more sustainable territorial organisation and development models that would make cities and regions more efficient in the use of natural resources and increasing social responsibility in dealing with common goods, in turn making the region more resilient against climate change impacts.

Even if the process of EU Integration has been slowing down during the last years, to join the EU is a crucial step for the Western Balkan countries. In particular, despite the obvious economic and political advantages that the EU accession could bring, the latter should also provide an important impulse in terms of social identity and cooperation (Solly et al. 2018). Full EU membership would facilitate the addressing of the above-mentioned territorial challenges that could be faced more effectively through coordinated policies and cooperation initiatives. Cooperation is certainly one of the main messages of the EU. In particular, countries are required to progressively overcome the historical reticence by promoting common initiatives in various fields (Trkulja and Dabović, in this volume). To promote this, the EU has launched a series of multi-later cooperation programmes, under the flag of the European Territorial Cooperation objective<sup>11</sup> (Solly and Berisha, in this volume). For the Western Balkan countries, this represents an unprecedented opportunity for improving economic development, increasing administrative capacity and better interconnections of civil society, and fostering inter-institutional networking (Berisha 2018b).

Finally, particular attentions should be dedicated to the potential territorial impacts related to ever-increasing globalisation trends. Despite the economic transition and liberalisation processes that had characterised the Western Balkan Region since 1989, after almost three decades, the latter is not yet fully integrated economically with the rest of the continent. At the same time, the region is subjected to significant external pressures, and due to the crucial geopolitical position, it occupies between Asia and Western Europe and between the Mediterranean and the more economically developed Western and Central Europe. The recent Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has concentrated its economic efforts in developing important infrastructure projects in the region, like the acquisition and extension of a number of important harbours (e.g. the Piraeus and the Trieste ports), the acquisition of industries, and the realisation of transport roads (as the Belgrade-Budapest railway) (Mondozzi et al. 2019). The over-exposition to Chinese investments may become, for some countries, a distraction along the European pathway, in turn hampering the EU Integration process. This could be, on the one hand, a great opportunity to attract external (additional) investments but, on the other hand, the risk is that those investments and external interests might create

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<sup>11</sup>At present, the Balkans Countries are included in numerous Interreg, Interreg-IPA, and IPA CBC initiatives. They are also participating in a series transnational cooperation programmes and strategies like European macro-regional strategy for the Adriatic Ionian Region (EUSAIR) and for the Danube Region (EUSDR).



further political disputes and geographical divisions with still unknown territorial impacts (Cotella and Berisha 2019; Berisha and Cotella 2019).

## 2.5 Conclusions

The Western Balkan Region has recurrently undergone territorial, economic, and political changes. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the region has suffered from social, political, and economic instabilities, which worsened during the transition period, produced unavoidable impacts on territorial development dynamics. The shift from centralised regimes to democratic and free market systems has paved the way for the introduction of new territorial governance and spatial planning mechanisms that have reflected the main historical contingencies (Nadin et al. 2018). The chapter has shown which kind of drivers and mechanisms have been at the basis of the territorial governance and spatial planning shift from a more normative to a more strategic and integrated approach.

In particular, the changes were driven by both internal and external influences. The transition brought a series of institutional adaptations in order to address issues like privatisation, liberalisation, and decentralisation. This process of adaptation has not been linear at all, but it required a series of reforms in the field of spatial planning, administration, and self-government. At the same time, the process of EU integration paved the way for a further internationalisation of territorial governance and spatial planning (Berisha 2018a), occurred through the circulation of knowledge and ways of doing things from other part of Europe (Cotella et al. 2015), a process that has been also supported by the activity of numerous international actors implementing their programmes, strategies, and projects.

However, the newly introduced territorial governance practices did not seem able to steer territorial development towards a more sustainable direction; a number of territorial challenges worsened and persisted until the present days, as a consequence of increasing urban development pressure, regional disparities, and overexploitation of natural resources. To address these issues, decision and policy-makers should necessarily support joint initiatives and common strategies in order to reduce the impact or at least address the main global challenges that region is facing (above all: the impact of the investment of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative). This will require political convergence among the various countries, something that could be achieved with the support of the EU institutions and the multilateral cooperation initiatives put in place as a consequence of the integration process. In this respect, the countries of the Western Balkan Region should focus on improving: (i) spatial cooperation by facilitating the movement of people and goods and adopting common territorial development strategies; (ii) institutional cooperation in the sense that countries should facilitate the exchange of data and increasing policy coordination with regard to common regional challenges, and finally (iii) social coordination enabling the civil society activism to work together for a better regional development trajectory.

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