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Regional security cooperation reinvented: Western Balkans counterterrorism initiative

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the Western Balkans Counterterrorism Initiative (WBCTi), originally a Slovenian proposal of late 2014, represents an efficient form of regional security cooperation, particularly when regional EU integration is considered. The Initiative that was accepted by the Justice and Home Affairs Council of the EU in late 2015 is the first of its kind. It is aimed at both incorporating and integrating all forms of international assistance that concern increasing the capacity to prevent and combat terrorism, violent extremism, and radicalisation leading to terrorism. Additionally, it is directed at decreasing duplication of actions by international actors and raising levels of efficiency of security cooperation and reform. This article analyses the Initiative by focusing on its structure and claiming that its specific framework represents an innovative approach establishing a fully functional regional structure outlining EU-Western Balkans security cooperation.

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Introduction

The Western Balkans has re-emerged as a particularly fragile region in recent years. Perennial internal factors of instability in weak economies with low opportunity, poor (democratic) governance, serious and organised crime and corruption are now combined with the perceived halt in the EU integration processes. Additionally, contemporary external influences threatening social and ethnic cohesion in the region, particularly the destabilising role of Russia, have been considerable. On these grounds, extremist ideologies and propaganda have also taken root in the region in the last several years. In this regard, security of the region has started featuring higher than ever before on the EU agenda. In recent years, challenges of terrorism, violent extremism, and radicalisation have become a joint threat to the EU and its partners in the Western Balkans, as their security is said to have never been so closely intertwined. EU leaders have recognised the need for consistent action on security flaws exposed in recent terrorist attacks in Europe, including the need for action within the EU-Western Balkans cooperative arrangements.

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The region has indeed seen a proliferation of a number of regional security cooperation initiatives in recent years, either those regionally or those externally generated and funded. It is principally the EU that has supported regional cooperation (EU Commission), primarily through the Stabilisation and Association Process since the Thessaloniki Agenda of 2003. This move is said to have been intended as a replication of the successful EU model for the region in fostering peaceful cooperation, economic development, and democratisation (Bechev 2006). With the establishment of a number of regional cooperation initiatives, the EU impact based chiefly on conditionality has also prompted the establishment of several indigenous regional institutions (Bechev 2006, p. 28).

Debates on challenges associated with or leading to terrorism began overwhelming the European policy agenda in 2014 and were soon recognised as a priority issue in the EU-Western Balkans relations. The topic gained a prominent place in these relations through major EU politico-strategic guidelines, such as the EU Global Strategy (EU), and resulted in some resolute steps at policy level at respective EU forums in the period of 2014-2015 (EU Council 2015). In fact, major regional security challenges, attesting how deeply embedded the Western Balkans is in the European security area, include:

- a) the influx of refugees and migrants along the Balkan route,
- b) a number of foreign terrorist fighters in the region,
- c) the rise of fundamentalism (Wahhabism and regional jihadist cells),
- d) the local origins of weapons used in terrorist attacks in Europe (lax borders and past conflicts).

Regional authorities additionally face the challenge of reintegrating returnees, particularly children raised in violence and exposed to the threat of homegrown extremism, which is the main driving force behind Islamic radicalism. Vulnerabilities of youth, minorities, and their social exclusion often lead to radicalisation. Insufficient knowledge and understanding of the triggers and factors accompany the lack of a coordinated policy response. Hence, in 2015 a comprehensive capacity-building effort in the neighbouring region was recognised as crucial for the EU to assist the region, with the underlying assumption that the Western Balkans would in time be able to cope with these challenges themselves.

The EU has been attributed the leading role in the reform of regional security policies, with Brussels being the primary external security actor applying its conditionality approach. At the same time, the EU has by no means been the only contributor/actor, nor has its approach been flawless.

Firstly, numerous other external actors and donors, state and non-state, have contributed in this regard by establishing:

- a) regional legal bases for cross-border law enforcement cooperation,
- b) regional hubs for countering serious and organised crime and for information exchange,
- c) EU-Western Balkans policy-level (both strategic and operational) networks for cooperation that are both hosted and initiated locally and externally,
- d) various forms of bilateral technical and other assistance.

They have all nurtured the capacities of the countries and their authorities to cope with multiple security challenges, both domestically and regionally.

Secondly, it is thus of no surprise that the most relevant critiques of contemporary regional cooperation in the area of internal security are related to the lack of both coordination and efficiency. This is mostly due to low rates of implementation that have loomed large (Bechev 2005, 2006, Malagurski 2008, Prezelj 2013). In that regard, various political-level regional summits under different instruments, often proposing one set of priorities after another and being uncoordinated, have remained mostly declaratory and without results in terms of (consistent) ground implementation.

A proposal for a comprehensive and integrative approach to counterterrorism was given by Slovenia within the EU Council working bodies. The Initiative was later endorsed by EU ministers, together with its first multiannual Integrated Plan of Action (WBCTi iPA) in late 2015 (EU WBCTi 13887/15). It is based largely on principles embedded in regional security cooperation, such as regional ownership, and backed from the very onset by the regional cooperation frameworks on different levels. This was a call for greater sustainability and ownership of efforts to be achieved by promoting good governance and minimising the risks that lack of coordination would bring by limiting the impact of efforts and dedicated investment.

Last but not least, the EU's latest enlargement strategy of February 2018 reinstates security and rule of law as a *conditio sine qua non* in terms of a reinforced EU perspective for the region. This perspective is placed next to the concept of an "enhanced EU-Western Balkans engagement," where the Counterterrorism Initiative is mentioned in terms of ensuring coherence and synergies of actions (EU Commission 2018). There are several critical factors with a negative influence on the low rates of ground implementation when addressing relevant experiences from efforts to advance internal security in the region, including reforms fostered or financed by the EU. So far it has chiefly been the low implementation rates that have plagued regional and external assistance efforts in the Western Balkans security reform.

Structure of the article, theoretical and methodological considerations

The article discusses the Western Balkans Counterterrorism Initiative in terms of its approach and methodology and later argues how this Initiative is different from other security cooperation arrangements. Additionally, the article analyses the Initiative in terms of its potential contribution to the successful implementation of the EU's renewed strategic regional outlook. The Initiative is said to be very much complementing the Union's strategic objectives because it subsumes both those groups aiming to advance engagement with the region in matters of security as well as those groups prescribed through formal venues of conditionality.

Its potential is, therefore, analysed in terms of its three most relevant methodological aspects, which no other regional initiative has possessed to date. Furthermore, these three aspects provide the Initiative with specific tools to overcome the known pitfalls of regional security cooperation and externally-led reform experienced thus far. These aspects are those of coordination, alignment, and merging. Therefore, this is the rationale behind naming three respective sections of this article in the given way. The given Initiative is structured as a process of coordination both in terms of specific activities as well as

aligning policy-level solutions generated in the process of actors' security reform objectives. It additionally provides for merging of existing expertise, which can be especially relevant in those policy areas where up-to-date and applicable contributor expertise may be lacking.

Methodologically, this article aims to answer two research questions:

1. What innovative approach has the WBCTi introduced when compared to other regional security arrangements in terms of its structure and aspects?
2. How does this innovative approach relate to the EU integration of the said region?

In regard to these questions, the authors believe that the Initiative has introduced an innovative approach when compared to other regional security initiatives and appropriate frameworks. This includes both the ones that had existed previously and those still in existence. The first research question, therefore, aims to outline the uniqueness of the Initiative and its advantages, whereby attention is paid to analysing its three structural aspects. These respective aspects make the WBCTi ultimately different and more beneficial than any other regional security initiative due to it being more complex and multifaceted.

Moreover, answering the second research question is to outline the authors' claim that the Initiative is unique in its approach, and hence in this regard, it very much complements the EU integration of the region. Having in mind the already established, multidimensional nature/structure of the Initiative, the authors believe its approach may actually support not only objectives of regional (security) cooperation but also the EU enlargement of the region. It is crucial to note that regional cooperation is considered one of the main pillars of the EU accession process, particularly so when Europeanisation of the said region is considered. The region has had to tackle serious problems in its EU accession so far, and a multitude of issues emanating from a conflict-ridden regional past will have to be addressed before joining the Union. Proper regional (security) cooperation is thus a vital aspect in assisting the process of transition.

As for theoretical background, the authors have based their arguments on the issue at hand within the theory of European integration, enlargement, and Europeanisation. Europeanisation is generally understood as the process of spreading EU norms, rules, and regulations within those states wishing to join the Union. As for the Western Balkans, Europeanisation has been grounded chiefly in the principle of conditionality by which states aspiring to join the Union need to meet a set of criteria and reach certain milestones to become EU members (Elbasani 2014, pp. 3–22). Additionally, considering the fact that the Western Balkan states are significantly different than, for instance, their Central European counterparts, the EU has placed heavy emphasis on regional (security) cooperation, aiming to resolve disputes that had led to past conflicts. Disputed borders, statehood issues, the considerable influence of organised crime, rule of law issues, and, among others, relatively weak and ineffectual governments have influenced Brussels to adopt a particular line. This line is based on mechanisms within the enlargement criteria (often termed Copenhagen (Plus) Criteria), an increased importance of regional perspective in cooperation, and conditionality within Stabilisation and Association Agreements towards the EU membership (Elbasani 2014, pp. 3–22).

Therefore, Europeanisation of the said region is primarily built on regional (security) cooperation and the establishment of networks of collaboration, without which it would be impossible to advance in the EU integration process. In that regard, this article

claims that the Initiative and cooperation emanating from it may actually play a very constructive role by adding to the perspective of extended regional relations and fully developed multifaceted cooperation. The authors of this article are fully aware of the negative aspects of the Europeanisation process and acknowledge them fully (such as the issue of “stabilitocracy”, among others), but this particular contribution is not intended to address these issues (Bieber 2017, also scholarship by Börzel). On this point, when discussing Europeanisation and highlighted regional (security) cooperation on the part of the EU, contributions by authors such as Lange, Nechev, Trauner, and Dokos come to mind. These authors have debated cooperation and security in the region as being essentially “shared.” Hence, the Western Balkans has been said to be “an integral part of core Europe” and “treated as a single and indivisible security space because of the various socio-economic networks connecting those countries with the EU and the high permeability of the Union’s external borders with those countries” (Dokos 2017, pp. 105–110). Therefore, “indivisibility of security” and need for cooperation in this respect actually warrants “the treatment of countries in the Western Balkans in this context as both partners and as a buffer zone to prevent the spill over of security problems from this fragile region into the rest of the EU” (Dokos 2017, pp. 105–110).

In that regard, the Initiative can be seen as primarily fulfilling essentially “shared” cooperation and security goals, thus addressing previously mentioned issues in the region for the sake of both regional and EU security. This point largely complements the nature of the ongoing EU enlargement of the Western Balkans. Last but not least, it may also be useful to mention Trauner’s research on the issue at hand. When referring to EU-Western Balkans relations in the area of internal security, this author concluded on the division between two types of “external governance” (Trauner 2010). Namely, as opposed to external governance merely through the EU conditionality transfer, adherence to the EU rules prior to accession is also driven by “network governance” (Trauner 2010). Both forms of rule transfer have played an integral part in the Western Balkans’ preparations for EU membership, while network governance has also acted as a complement to the EU conditionality transfer. Since the authors are still unsure at this time what practical form or policy approach the concept “engagement” (as dubbed by the new EU strategy) will assume, this article explores two points. One, the article discusses the given Initiative in terms of the forms of rule transfer as argued by Trauner (Trauner 2010). Two, it pays attention to further dimensions of security cooperation while providing accompanying considerations. This very point on the external perspective and the Western Balkans future in the EU go hand in hand with an already assumed regional approach on behalf of the Union. Brussels has externally laid substantial emphasis on the “regatta” approach, whereby states in the Western Balkans are to race towards the EU and positively influence and assist each other in reforms, thus overcoming a multitude of similar problems emanating from their common past.

Contribution to the Field

The article furthers the field because it fills the research gap that has existed up to now in the academic literature on the topic. Having in mind that the Initiative is quite new, it should be noted that, indeed, academic literature on this particular issue does not exist. The authors, for that matter, are not aware of any academic writings dealing with the

topic at hand. They are, however, well aware of a number of non-academic publications, the bulk of which have been produced by the organisation that developed the WBCTI proposal, itself. These publications have come in the form of various reports, assessments, and analyses on security and terrorism-related topics on behalf of various think tanks and NGOs.

Furthermore, as for an academic treatment of the topic of this article, to date, no academic piece can be found. There are, though, numerous pieces in the form of volumes and articles on several related topics, such as EU security agenda, whereby various dimensions and aspects (including external), have been analysed (Wolff et al. 2010, Biscop and Whitman 2013, Biscop 2016). Similarly, EU security policy (Rees 2008), border management and related issues (Léonard 2010, Coliantes-Celador and Juncos 2012), as well as counter-terrorism (Argomaniz, Bures and Kaunert 2015, Boer 2015), have been addressed in this manner. In addition, regional (security) cooperation in the Western Balkans and regional security sector reforms have also been discussed (Bruns 2016, Ekengren and Simons 2016), with the latter receiving more attention than the former (Bechev 2006, Seroka 2008), however, and with most publications being non-academic rather than academic. All things being equal, academic research has touched upon the issue of internal security in the accession process of current EU candidate countries to a very small extent. Adding to this, sporadic research has been done on impediments to the efficiency of regional cooperation initiatives and regional ownership, all in the light of EU conditionality and its miscellaneous effects (see scholarship by Bechev and Ristevska Jordanova). In fact, only a few authors have so far analysed the regional internal security cooperation in any considerable depth, due to information being less accessible. This point reflects the very nature of the given cooperation and its high level of operationalisation, with authors not being able to gain much insight from the outside. Hence, it would serve well to revisit critical views posed by the academic community to provide an assessment of the complexity of regional cooperation and to ascertain to what extent it has been important for the internal security policies of the Western Balkan countries. This claim could go against the pervasive reasoning of regional policymakers that after EU membership is eventually attained, any regional cooperation arrangements by default become less, if at all, applicable and useful.

Last of all, this article may serve as an invitation to other researchers to engage in this particular direction. The Western Balkans represent a crucial and consequential region for the EU due to being in the EU's immediately adjacent surroundings and fully engaged in the accession process. Therefore, it is apparent that more research, particularly in areas of regional security cooperation and the fight against terrorism, extremism, and radicalisation, is needed. Hence, any (academic) contributions serving to advance discussion on new and innovative (regional) security initiatives and measures, that may perhaps be applied in the region and elsewhere, are more than welcomed. Additionally, treatments focused on the regional needs and specificities, and treatments also touching on the EU regional approach, are likewise needed. Recent problems with immigration, (still influential) organised crime structures, nationalist and authoritarian tendencies in politics, sluggish economies, faulty rules of law, and at times (bitter) disagreements in regional relations all point in this direction. Thus, the need of further stabilising of the Western Balkans, particularly on behalf of the EU, still looms large.

WBCTi: innovation and effectiveness through coordination, alignment, and merging?

This section introduces the analysis of the WBCTi framework, whose innovative approach differs significantly from any previous regional cooperation initiatives in terms of three structural aspects already mentioned: coordination (actions taken), alignment (goals set), and finally, merging (of expertise). The authors acknowledge that the full impact of the Initiative will likely be more visible and measurable several years from now, as it is completely new. The authors, however, aim to demonstrate that the structural aspects under analysis, as in the main characteristics of its innovative approach, provide the Initiative with the potential to enable efficient and effective achievement of internal security reforms in the Western Balkans via coherent external assistance. The authors in that regard wish to explore the WBCTi as complementing the EU integration objectives in the region. In terms of EU integration and rule transfer in the area of internal security (essentially, bulk of policies of the EU Justice and Home Affairs domain), the given analysis reveals a set of unique characteristics of the Western Balkans. This is particularly so when it comes to the region's strategic-political position and internal security issues when compared to, for instance, those regions in previous EU enlargement rounds (the Eastern European enlargement in particular). Given the density of regional cooperation networks, one may easily recognise the existence of different channels of rule transfer. The authors apply the definition of "network governance" as defined by Trauner and further explore the potential of the WBCTi to act as an efficient complement to (and even facilitator of) EU conditionality and respective external governance.

First of all, the specifics of the WBCTi model of cooperation, as defined by the aforementioned EU Council Conclusions, need to be addressed (Council of the EU 14986/15). The first multiannual "Integrated Plan of Action – iPA" was endorsed in a separate document annexed to the Council Conclusions, representing a central operational tool of the WBCTi mechanism (WBCTi IPA 2015-2017). The iPA is a legally non-binding document but is intended to provide a moral imperative to the listed "partners" to implement agreed activities, including EU institutions, agencies, and the Member States' national authorities. The WBCTi iPA 2015-2017 also encouraged partners to consult with this tool before entering into the planning of any new activities in order to efficiently avoid any duplication and overlapping of actions. There are additional WBCTi tools, such as an online matrix of ongoing and planned activities in the region, as well as the role of a formally appointed "WBCTi Lead Partner," i.e. an organisation in charge of coordinating the WBCTi policy fields and implementation.

Secondly, a crucial element of the iPA-based model of cooperation is prioritisation. For the last decade or so, the region has been quite notorious for convening more than ten annual political-level summits under different instruments. This has led to one set of priorities after another being discussed and submitted, with these being not only uncoordinated but also mostly declaratory and lacking consistent ground implementation. Duplication has thus persisted even at the political level and been left largely unaddressed during the implementation phase, with priorities getting blurred by opaqueness and complexity of the regional cooperation architecture. The EU at the same time did not adopt or commit to any relevant extent to the regional meeting outputs containing priorities so that it would generate further action or formal agreements, and neither did the

Western Balkans policy officials commit to advocate them in other settings. Ownership has thus remained rather questionable.

The WBCTi iPA, however, is based on a single and unified list of priorities prepared on the basis of priority needs identified in close cooperation with different levels represented by the beneficiary authorities. Needs are acquired both through a “bottom-up” (expert-level needs identification) and “top-down” processes (political-level endorsement, proceeding achievement of regional and EU ownership of priorities through appropriate endorsement and awareness-raising). This approach represents a significant deviation from the ones utilised by numerous actors in the Western Balkans in obtaining working priorities. Crucially, the WBCTi needs assessment phase also involves the contribution of expertise, baseline information, and finally work plans from relevant external donors and from the management of regionally based cooperation instruments.

In the next phase, the iPA develops a list of activities that are based on a jointly agreed list of priorities. Here, the “integrative” element of the WBCTi is reflected in its ability to combine relevant activities executed by two or more different donors, directing them towards the same expected result and resulting in meaningful financial cost–benefit efficiency. Partners have to agree on realistic timelines and define who is in charge of results, identify actual or potential future funding, and contribute to the shared WBCTi monitoring and evaluation framework. The iPA 2015–2017 set eight priority objectives with 62 activities, thus involving more than fifty stakeholders. The WBCTi partners include the regional beneficiaries of Albania, Bosnia–Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, with also Moldova and Turkey. Additionally, various EU partners (Member States, European Commission’s Directorates focusing on the policies of enlargement, the Justice and Home Affairs Council, the European External Action Service, the Office of the EU Counterterrorism Coordinator, the Council of the EU General Secretariat, and the EU agencies of Europol, Frontex, Cpol, and Eurojust), international donors, and finally organisations hosting regional initiatives are also incorporated.

In the process of planning, the Initiative also fully considers that regional level solutions, as opposed to only national level solutions or reforms, can have significantly higher added value. The Regional Gap Analysis 2014, for instance, argued that such an approach contributes to prevention of backsliding in national reforms and contributes to obstacle removals, thus essentially addressing issues such as slower progress, (deep) political divisions, and similar issues (Report on Gap Analysis 2016). Geographic variations of regional instruments in the Western Balkans, which may go either within or beyond the scope of any other activities or funding arrangements, are fully considered by the WBCTi, which considers them on an ad hoc basis. For that matter, the WBCTi cooperation with Turkey and Kosovo, that are not contracting parties to some initiatives, also goes either through bilateral cooperation, or is based on existing solutions developed by regional initiatives themselves: in the case of the Kosovo and Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe (PCC SEE), Priština has not signed this Convention but is invited to meetings and activities according to the respective Rules of Procedure having been amended (PCC SEE).

A) coordination

According to Rajko Kozmelj, who first initiated the WBCTi, it began as a coordination platform to address gaps in the regional policy reform (personal communication with R. Kozmelj, October 2017). It was clear in 2014, as strengthening the EU–Western

Balkans cooperation on counterterrorism turned into a priority for the Union, that its contribution could only be limited. This was mostly due to a lack of knowledge on regional cooperation and the regional cooperation capacities already in existence, especially if they resulted from initiatives contributed by donors other than the EU (Report on Gap Analysis 2016, pp. 7-8). In contemporary policy analysis on regional security cooperation, a general observation on the lack of coordination in regional security cooperation is hardly original, but it nevertheless represented the primary *raison d'être* for the WBCTi. It was successfully argued that the Initiative was urgently necessary to not only improve the efficiency of cooperation but to improve the EU's own investment and synergies with that of other donors. This largely correlates to the EU efforts of integration of the region in years to come and fully complements respective Union enlargement goals as discussed in respective scholarship.

Several initiatives had previously attempted to address the issue of coordination in regional (security) cooperation. They were initiated by different actors, including the individual EU Member States and regional actors, leaving aside some ad hoc donor coordination conferences in individual target countries that produced little more than an exchange of information and contacts. For instance, in 2006, during Austria's Presidency of the Council of EU, Vienna proposed an Action Oriented Paper that outlined major gaps in Justice and Home Affairs cooperation (Council of the EU 9272/06), and led the EU Member States to recognise the need for donor coordination related to institutional and capacity building in terms of the overview of EU-financed assistance projects. Furthermore, in 2010 the German-initiated "Treptower Group" successfully provided a more permanent mechanism for the informal exchange of information on situational awareness and a network of contacts for donors, also through an online matrix of activities. Subsequently, however, this mechanism lost support and is no longer functioning. Only a few regional initiatives have conducted external coordination and embedded this line of activity into their (formal) mechanisms. For instance, the aforementioned PCC SEE defined this as a formal part of the Secretariat's mandate, which convenes regular external coordination meetings.

None of these initiatives, however, resulted in any sufficient and systematic effort beyond a mere overview and periodic information exchange; nor did they achieve any effect at the policy level (see Report on Gap Analysis 2016). Claims of lacking coordination have rather become a "mantra" both in regional and EU policy circles. In contrast to the expected positive impact, this has actually had a negative influence on efforts that potentially could have made a positive contribution to regional development: namely, it added to the political condemnation of some planned efforts based on their perceived duplication with others, which could have been argued based merely on individual, and not necessarily well-informed, perceptions. The aforementioned Regional Gap Analysis found that it was left almost entirely to the beneficiary countries to prevent duplications of external assistance efforts offered. This factor made it almost impossible for political representatives to criticise or let alone refuse an offer coming from a valued external donor, even if the effort would be duplicating others. There were also several systemic factors hindering any viable process of national coordination, such as:

- a) lack of dissemination of information on the part of a recipient unit or an individual assigned to participate in an external assistance effort,

- b) lack of follow-ups on a national level,
- c) lack of national evaluation mechanisms of implementation, and
- d) inappropriate representation in the governance of regional initiatives occurring largely due to language barriers.

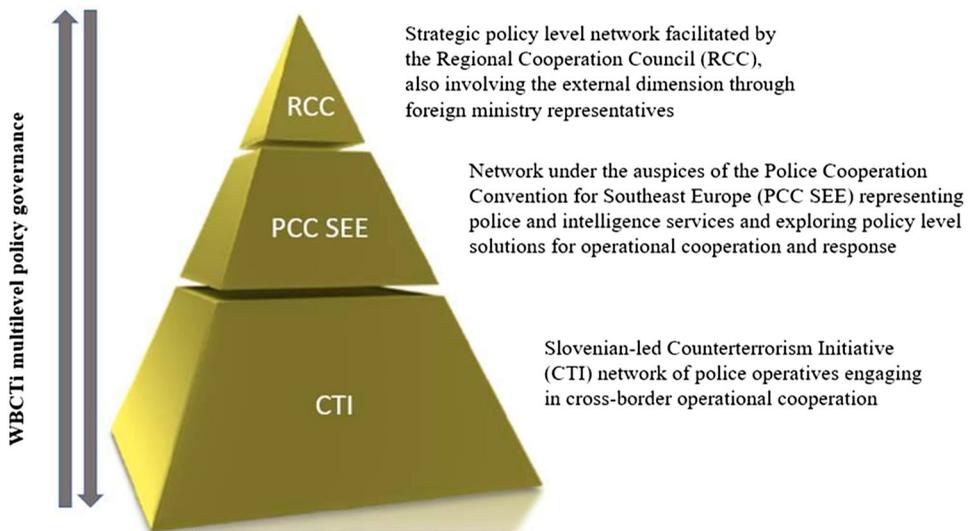
Prezelj argued that the superficiality of regional cooperation was caused by lacking human and financial capacity at national levels to embrace and to deepen expertise on regional cooperation, or to follow such a high number of regional initiatives, including a limited ability to coordinate between different services in a single ministry (Prezelj 2013, p. 98). This particular issue, in terms of EU enlargement scholarship, is crucial to note as regional cooperation has been characterised as essential for the integration process. Experience and information sharing, common goals in joining the Union, particular “rules of the game” accepted along the way, have all loomed large in this regard. This, last but not least, also revolves around the respective scholarship argument on the region being essentially a single and indivisible security space.

The Initiative also addresses the lack of implementation typical in regional cooperation initiatives due to a commonly occurring gap preventing effective engagement of a beneficiary authority and impeding ground implementation, even in the case of an urgently needed regional policy solution. On one hand, an agreed upon high-level conclusion on the establishment of a crucial operational arrangement may subsequently not be coordinated with relevant national services, which do not react to an invitation to participate further in its realisation. On the other hand, a crucial need can be recognised bottom-up, i.e. by police operatives who investigate cases of, for instance, cross-border crime. The donor or project leader in that particular regional initiative may invest significant resources into meetings, study visits, or legal reforms, but the final result fails to receive sufficient visibility and support on the part of senior management. This may prevent ground implementation of the previously agreed upon solution. Since mid-2014, after the issue of counterterrorism became central at the EU level and the Western Balkans re-emerged as a key region in terms of security, the agenda has been pursued accordingly by numerous actors and donors involved in regional and/or EU-Western Balkans security cooperation (EU Council Decision 2008/615/JHA). Visibility (and funding opportunities) of these regional initiatives has grown, and their objectives expanded from counterterrorism, in the strict law enforcement sense, to prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism (P-CVE), a policy requiring a multiagency approach but one that has seen low or no awareness of roles of sectors other than police in battling this complex societal challenge. These topics have been addressed by an increasing number of donors engaging in different areas from youth empowerment and to specialist training for prison officials. This in itself represents one of the biggest challenges for WBCTi, which entered upon coordination and the direction of efforts towards comprehensive policy solutions, which have to be applicable, sustainable and in the long run will also have to comply with the EU-prescribed standards.

Since the region has recently seen a rise in the Foreign Terrorist Fighters phenomenon, EU experts have respectively started transferring relevant EU concepts, UN and EU legal standards, and EU-inspired policy solutions to the appropriate fields. This includes a regional initiative agreed within the PCC SEE implementation process to transfer provisions of EU Prüm Decisions on cross-border cooperation related to combating terrorism

and cross-border crime, which will enable exchange of fingerprint and vehicle data and DNA profiles by automated means. More than that, the EU-adopted Common Risk Indicators on Foreign Terrorist Fighters were delivered to border authorities, while regional networking has allowed for experience/EU good practices sharing and extensive international contributions to capacity building. Intra-regional cooperation gaps recognised by Brussels and by regional practitioners resulted in more networking: in 2015, the contracting parties established a formal law enforcement network within the PCC SEE mechanism, which brought together law enforcement and intelligence representatives of eleven countries at the strategic level to address operational gaps and deepen cooperation in cross-border investigations. Additionally, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) launched the high-level Regional Platform for Countering Radicalisation and Violent Extremism Leading to Terrorism and Recruitment of Foreign Terrorist Fighters, covering the external dimension of counterterrorism policies at the level of foreign ministry officials. In general, this and also previous regional networking efforts have more or less been initiated bottom-up by participating states, but within externally supported frameworks of financial sustainability provided through the EU and other donors' funds.

Lack of coordination and complementarity and the presence of duplications in the regional cooperation sphere have persisted. In order to mitigate this, the WBCTi introduced a multilevel policy coordination mechanism. It includes three levels of mutually linked and interoperable regional platforms, as can be seen on the following diagram.



Source: Authors' own work.

Annual joint meetings of the three networks are held to provide information exchange and conduct coordination, exposing gaps and engaging all relevant levels to eliminate them. They all involve Western Balkans officials, joined by the interested EU Member States and other neighbouring countries. In addition to serving their basic mandates alone, as has so far been the case with the regional security networks, their objectives are now structurally linked through the WBCTi. Additionally, the platform has enhanced communication and mutual trust between regional stakeholders at all levels of policy implementation, not only vertical (between relevant levels in home organisations), but

also horizontal (intra-regional and cross-regional). They operate within sustainable instruments of regional cooperation, allowing them to regularly facilitate efficient follow-up to previously identified gaps.

As a result of such coordination, a concrete outcome was facilitated by the WBCTi in the area of cross-border exchange of personal data in 2016, an issue crucial for the international counterterrorism effort. Based on previous need identification, the PCC SEE and the Slovenian-led Counterterrorism Initiative members have ventured into a joint endeavour of preparing a first regional operational report based on available legal bases and on the process of secure cross-matching of data that previously had only been available at the national level. The resulting “intelligence picture” will then be brought back up to the policy level to be dealt with appropriately, whereby the WBCTi will thus maximise the use of available intelligence in the region for the planning of successful and proactive investigation of Terrorism and Violent Extremism influencing regional as well as European security. The multilevel platform has also seen increased engagement with Europol and Interpol in the efforts related to information exchange, threat assessment, and operational case analysis. The WBCTi coordination is based primarily on achieving a high level of commitment on the part of all involved actors. Namely, as terrorism and related complex social phenomena have become serious concerns, this warrants a tangible response on the part of the EU and other external donors. So far, this approach has proven to be viable as wider and more inclusive support and formal commitment than ever before has been achieved. The WBCTi target group is not limited to the main beneficiaries. Rather, it also involves providers of external assistance, such as various EU agencies and institutions, Member States, other state and non-state donors, including international organisations, the USA, and others.

Moreover, the Initiative has become part of the EU policy process through the adoption of the “Council Conclusions on the WBCTi,” but it is the first time that the EU itself committed to this extent to an instrument or policy approach that is regionally generated. This is to say that the Initiative had been warranted not by the EU policy but by voiced perceptions of beneficiary countries themselves, endorsed at political level positions in several regional political cooperation frameworks. It was only later in 2015 that the European Commission engaged and strongly supported the development of it, including co-funding. It is important to note that in contrast to the WBCTi, none of the previous coordination efforts had received formal support on behalf of any EU entities. Especially important is the support of the European Commission, the most influential donor in the region. This does not make it part of the formal EU rule transfer, but this particular fact nevertheless brought the domestic adaptation costs practically down to zero. Besides, political support to the WBCTi not only made the ministers’ efforts on countering terrorism more visible, but it also showed to the public that they encouraged achieving cost-efficiency (resulting from coordination) in engaging with the international community. The EU actors and Member States are formally committed through the endorsed Council Conclusions at the level of the EU Justice and Home Affairs ministers, while others have made a formal declaratory commitment to the WBCTi objectives and allowed for their activities to be integrated into the iPA 2015-2017.

Furthermore, after the initial WBCTi proposal was submitted to the competent Council working group named the Terrorism Working Party, this working group was allowed to establish an informal subgroup dealing specifically with the WBCTi. Meetings were open

to all EU Member States, EU institutions and agencies, which contributed to all phases of preparing the iPA 2015-2017 and the subsequent iPA 2018-2020. The WBCTi and its iPA 2015-2017 were also presented at the EU-Western Balkans Justice and Home Affairs Ministerial Forum in December 2015, under the Luxembourg Presidency, as a central topic for discussion, on part of the Council Presidency and the European Commissioner for Migration and Home Affairs (Presidency of the Council of the EU 2015). The fact that the EU itself has committed its institutions and agencies to WBCTi to this level is seen as a decisive factor that can potentially bring concrete results that were previously lacking in the regional initiatives, let alone that the WBCTi actually provides for a shared responsibility in coordination between beneficiaries and all donors. This particular issue touching on all forms of regional cooperation being supported by the EU largely goes along the main lines of Europeanisation literature highlighting greater need for more coherent regional ties to be created, thus assisting states of the region in seeing themselves and their neighbours as equal cooperating partners sharing knowledge and competence on the road to EU membership. It may also help address past regional issues and offer valuable incentives of cooperation by creating a common space of interests in the process of joining the Union.

B) alignment

The aforementioned Regional Gap Analysis explored different European policies and their routes of influence on internal security policy development in the Western Balkans and it found that linking the EU enlargement conditions to regional cooperation in a coherent policy process and partnership was indeed necessary. The WBCTi has acted upon this finding and has not only set out to become an activity coordination mechanism, but is also pushing its underlying objective to provide an integrated policy response advancing the EU-Western Balkans Justice and Home Affairs cooperation, and complementing the regional EU integration objectives. This was aided by the expansion of the WBCTi approach in late 2016, when the Initiative became formally embedded into an overarching policy concept – the “Integrative Internal Security Governance – IISG” in the Western Balkans, which was also EU-endorsed (Council of the EU 15413/16, also Brdo Process Ministerial Framework). The IISG extended the WBCTi approach to the level of internal security policy as a whole by adding two other pillars focusing on countering serious and organised crime, and border security and management, respectively. On 8 September 2017, regional interior ministers together with international and EU partners launched the IISG implementation process, appointing a supporting structure to implement this new policy in the Western Balkans. It is hosted by the Geneva Centre for Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) in Ljubljana. Both the EU and the regional IISG Board at the level of interior ministers have formally recognised the role of this structure. It has been tasked to coordinate security contributions of not only the EU but also the rest of the external assistance donors that is the international community as a whole (Council of the EU 15413/16).

Hence, the Initiative aims to integrate relevant policy goals targeting the Western Balkans in order to ensure coherent support to regional reform on the part of the international community. Crucially, achieving coherence of external assistance would also require coherence on the part of the EU as the most influential actor in this regard. As far as complementing the EU external governance is concerned, Trauner’s argument

may be applied, as he explored the EU-Western Balkans Justice and Home Affairs cooperation in terms of an external EU governance concept primarily developed in the Eastern European enlargement context. Trauner claimed that the concept was falling short of offering a sufficient theoretical explanation of Justice and Home Affairs rule transfer in the Western Balkans (Trauner 2009). He pointed to weaknesses in EU conditionality in the region, added to by some specific negative circumstances, primarily vagueness of EU membership as being a rather remote objective. In addition to this, Brussels resorted to posing additional, policy-related conditionality to the target countries. For instance, this has been done through the Visa Liberalisation process, whereby the EU formally linked national Visa Liberalisation roadmaps to the membership perspective, thus balancing the weaknesses of the EU conditionality-based approach (Trauner 2009, 2010). Furthermore, Trauner argued that the EU conditionality transfer is complemented, although not replaced, by network governance (Trauner 2009, 2010).

Therefore, it may be claimed that the WBCTi points to:

- a) on the one hand, the practical impact of network governance rule transfer in the Western Balkans, as it has existed in addition to the EU conditionality, and, on the other,
- b) how horizontal forms of network cooperation, including that which involves the EU Member States as well as Western Balkans countries, complement a vertical EU conditionality approach.

For instance, the CTI network of police operatives was formally established in 2011 to advance cross-border operational cooperation among Western Balkan countries and the interested EU Member States, independently of any vertically imposed EU conditionality, connecting all members on equal terms in a symmetrical partnership. It has produced policy solutions and enhanced the members' trust and information exchange. Importantly, it has encouraged exchanges with Europol. The Initiative provides an overview of such relevant initiatives, which it then submits to its alignment and coordination mechanisms by providing a stronger visibility of their coordinated objectives. As another example, it is worth mentioning the increasingly horizontal nature of cooperation in the now enlarged PCC SEE instrument of six non-EU and five EU member countries. Just as in the CTI network, this particular Convention's structures involve important factors of EU rule transfer despite the fact that in both cases the network cooperation has developed mostly independent of EU membership conditionality. The Initiative also considers objectives of those forms of cooperation, which are the least institutionalised and may have been dismissed from previous policy analyses on the EU external governance, as mere forms of traditional intergovernmental cooperation. The WBCTi overview demonstrates a blurred division between EU membership and non-membership in the current regional security cooperation in the pre-accession phase. Therefore, it can be concluded that in the contemporary Western Balkans, EU external governance through conditionality does not tell us much about mechanisms that can also lead to rule transfer. The Initiative thus also represents a useful venue for further analysis of the role and influence of the "regional cooperation policy" and its mechanisms, which have so far been neglected also due to a general lack of insight and their complexity.

Before this Initiative, Brussels was effectively disengaged in the ground implementation of what it had so strongly encouraged before. This may also have been the case due to the fact that the EU could not guarantee consistency of its support to efforts of regional cooperation. This approach allowed the European Commission to avoid any criticism of, or cause any tensions with, broader EU objectives for the region, such as those of the enlargement policy. As the proliferation of regional security initiatives and their growing operationalisation was witnessed, neither the EU institutions nor agencies could follow all their contents and developments. The EU withheld high-level external participation and limited its visibility to frameworks such as the EU-Western Balkans Justice and Home Affairs Ministerial Forum as its preferred formal venue for political dialogue with the region. Achieving consistency in the EU external activities has become more and more emphasised as a shared responsibility between the EU and its Member States. Duke, for instance, re-established a “consistency or coherence” principle as an important criterion for effective EU foreign policy, and this seems particularly important as even greater emphasis is paid to the consistency of EU external policies in the post-Lisbon period (Duke 1999).

The last policy alignment aspect to be mentioned here has to do with the lack of an agreed upon definition of “regional security.” As already argued, the EU has largely neglected regional security cooperation in the Western Balkans but has strongly encouraged vertical mechanisms of engaging the region. This has chiefly been done through Europol as the criminal information hub and agency supporting the Member States in combatting serious and organised crime and terrorism. This vertical expansion of the EU Justice and Home Affairs area claiming the Western Balkans partners has been strongly encouraged by Brussels and has led to the signing of operational agreements allowing for the exchange of personal data. Undoubtedly, cooperation with Europol has represented an important aspect of regional EU integration, as the European Commission assesses the rate of their compliance and contribution in this regard. However, cooperation with the Western Balkans has remained asymmetrical in terms of the region contributing data to Europol’s information system where a full reciprocity is still hindered based on Europol’s mandate alone. This can prove detrimental to the already achieved level of mutual trust and solidarity among operatives (Conclusions of the Seminar on Illicit Trafficking). Europol and the EU have referred to its vertical mechanisms of cooperation with the Western Balkans as “regional cooperation,” only to add to the confusion of Europol’s role in this respect. The authors would support greater consistency when it comes to planning further engagement with the Western Balkans offered by Europol’s new legal basis. Acknowledging the true potential of “regional security” in improving the region’s own ability to act as a security provider can bring about an efficient and well-directed EU-Western Balkans security engagement as anticipated from the new EU strategic direction.

Prezelj argued for a possibly “black” scenario for regional security cooperation in the near future by claiming that there was an overwhelming preference of policymakers in the Western Balkan countries to join the Euro-Atlantic integrations rather than to foster truly efficient regional cooperation per se (Prezelj 2013, p. 106). Hence, the future of regional security cooperation after EU membership would demonstrate how it had been actually held hostage to EU integration as it would suffer instantly after one of the countries became an EU member. The IISG has paved the way for a policy solution, such as an internal security policy cycle in the Western Balkans, based on the understanding of the region’s own ability to counter security challenges. A sustainable objective, it will

continue to play a crucial role also in the post-membership phase as regional security interests remain also with the Union. It aims to enable strategic guidance and coordination to regional operational law enforcement policy, fragments of which have already been supported by various donors. It will transfer the practice of the existing EU Policy Cycle in the fight against serious and organised crime, where it can benefit from intelligence-led policing expertise and capacities of some existing regional instruments. Vice versa, the Western Balkans will in this regard be enabled to contribute to Europol's work with an improved and enhanced regional security picture contributing to EU security. Such an endeavour would also provide Europol with an opportunity to reciprocate by supplying targeted assistance and expertise to the region in the pre-accession phase.

C) merging (of expertise)

Last but not least, the WBCTi has aimed to advance the sustainability of any policy solutions utilised on the part of all participating donors, chiefly the Union. In this process, the role of coordinator has proven to be pivotal, particularly in facilitating numerous consultations between partners related to monitoring implementation of crucial priorities. The process has thus enabled not only an exchange of information on actions to prevent duplication, but also a merging of expertise among partners. As a result, a policy solution generated within the WBCTi policy coordination in mid-2016, and representing a novelty both in the Union and in the Western Balkans, aims at preventing and countering radicalisation and violent extremism domestically and supports the exchange of good practices with the regional counterparts.

Additionally, the WBCTi has obtained the support of relevant donors, including the European Commission, to call upon partners to make sure that this particular policy objective is obtained via coherent and efficient external assistance to the region. In mid-2017, the leading partners in the Initiative, before entering into activities on the ground, set out to agree on a common conceptualisation of that model. This involved all relevant components of dealing with given challenges and committed to all relevant sectors, including civil society and religious communities, to systematic dealing with individual cases. A joint guiding document is currently being planned and would be implemented with the support of the European Commission. It is based on the expertise and experience of the EU Member States as contributed by the EU RAN Centre of Excellence. It is additionally based on the results of the previous exploration of ground conditions for the development of such a concept, in each beneficiary conducted by the regional Project "First Line," as led by the Slovenian Police and co-financed by the European Commission (personal communication with R. Kozmelj, October 2017). Through the WBCTi facilitation, the future policy solution will be subject to thorough consultations with all relevant sectors in each respective beneficiary (national workshops). In respect to the analysis done here, it will be possible to achieve the merging of expertise among all relevant donors, including the European Commission, the USA, and others who so far may have been contributing to different solutions based only within bilateral efforts and considering the needs of single beneficiaries. The Initiative has, through the existing formal commitment to its iPA objectives, successfully obtained much needed support to improve the sustainability of future solutions in a crucial area of policy by merging the expertise of relevant partners before proceeding to further planning and implementation. This will hopefully lead to both comprehensive and sustainable solutions in the future.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the WBCTi, as a completely new initiative to the Western Balkans regional security, can prove largely beneficial because, for one thing, it contributes to a new security framework aimed at addressing regional security issues in a complex region lacking ground implementation. For another, the Initiative complements the EU integration process, as it allows for more coherence regarding regional EU goals, more trust-building, and enhancements in regional (security) cooperation to be instituted. With the WBCTi, a coordinated EU investment can greatly improve its standing in a region dealing with dire internal and external security challenges, and where the EU is now able to rely not randomly but rather systematically on efforts of different international, regional, and state donors to tackle regional security vulnerability. Brussels has already acknowledged the need for additional coordination of its current assistance to the region, and this article claims that the EU can indeed gain considerable benefits from the WBCTi mechanism. This is also based on the fact that the Initiative is not an official part of the enlargement policy, despite being part of the EU Justice and Home Affairs *acquis*, but is wider in ownership. It is co-owned by all those who integrate their activities and efforts in the framework of the three Integrative Plans of Action (iPA). The initiative specifically promises to provide, for the first time, one rather elaborate and systemic insight into other sources, channels, and actions of assistance to Justice and Home Affairs reform in the Western Balkans.

Moreover, Brussels may also benefit from the merging of expertise under the WBCTi and the IISG. The Initiative can contribute to closing the current gap resulting from the lack of efficient structural alignment at the EU level, including among directorates in charge with Justice and Home Affairs policy and enlargement policy. Also, the Initiative could be used by Brussels in exploiting the potential of regional cooperation policy in the Western Balkans and its instruments, both for the promotion of EU good practice as well as cross-fertilisation with the lessons learned from the security practices of Western Balkan countries on the other. The WBCTi can also complement the methodology of the EU membership conditionality, which is currently based on national progress evaluation reports. Here, the Initiative can contribute to baseline information and offer expertise possessed by both the regional actors and external donors. Hence, this initiative may be understood as offering great potential, through the iPA-based methodology, in monitoring and overseeing the process of implementation in an efficient manner and with a clear overview of investments in a flood of regional initiatives and projects. Future use made of this instrument will prove to be very important in relation to the overall EU engagement with the Western Balkans, particularly so regarding consistent and independent monitoring reflecting all respective EU policy objectives. Last but not least, the Initiative may potentially respond to the need for an improved strategy of the EU in terms of engagement with third countries (or regions) worldwide. This may be particularly useful in relation to those regions, such as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), where regional cooperation and coordination are considered a top EU priority. Consequently, the Initiative may provide visibility, and thus represents an important venue to generate coordinated support to EU policy concepts and important EU standards to be transferred to the said region(s) by not leaving any space for typical donor logic as has been done to date.

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