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Beyond Traditional Boundaries: From State-Centric Diplomacy to More Participatory Approaches for a Sustainable Future in the Western Balkans

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Abstract: *The contemporary era has witnessed a significant evolution in diplomacy, transitioning from traditional state-led approaches to more open, multilateral methods and channels. This study evaluates the effectiveness and suitability of the new diplomatic disciplines, particularly in the Western Balkans region, which grapples with numerous structural challenges, ethnic and political divisions, and external interference. The influence of traditional state-centric diplomacy in this region necessitates a shift towards a more participatory, multi-stakeholder approach to promoting positive peace and cooperation. This reframing of diplomacy emphasizes the emergence of regionalism and multilateralism through multi-track diplomacy, involving private individuals, non-governmental organizations, societies, and engaged citizens to foster understanding through dialogue, cooperation, and deeper interaction. The analysis highlights the influence of innovative diplomatic channels interlinked and entrenched through a capillary diplomacy framework essential for regional application while exploring the constraints of traditional methods. It advocates for fresh diplomatic strategies and collaborative initiatives in the Western Balkans through a win-win formula and a participatory model based on multi-track diplomacy – repurposed and redesigned to advance the reconciliation process, rapprochement, and raise public awareness through effective communication in line with the EU integration goals and advancements.*

Keywords: *Traditional Diplomacy; New Diplomatic Tracks; Multi-Track Diplomacy; Western Balkans; Reconciliation; Cooperation*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, our world has become intricately interconnected, leading to a surge in diplomatic engagements across varied paths prioritizing collaboration, inclusiveness, and the engagement of diverse stakeholders beyond conventional government realms. Rather than supplanting traditional state-centric methods, this evolution enriches diplomatic endeavors, offering innovative solutions to complex contextual challenges and fostering a more united and cooperative society at a regional or global level. The practice of track 1 diplomacy, also known as "official diplomacy" or "traditional diplomacy", has deep historical origins that can be traced back to the earliest periods of human civilization. It has always been controlled and ruled by governments of independent states or "international actors" (Cull 2009, 12), operating through state officials and channels to pursue desired objectives and outcomes. However, through negotiation or discussions, classical diplomacy is the primary avenue for managing relations between states and International organizations through various instruments within this field. It also functioned as the principal means of comprehending or interpreting other state endeavors and policies globally until the liberal order emerged after the post-World War II period. The liberal order has significantly influenced the development and application of international

relations theories, responding to the changing nature of the international system. In tandem with this theoretical evolution, the subdisciplines of diplomacy have also broadened their scope through various channeled practices, providing an even "more comprehensive understanding of International Relations".[1] These changes have brought attention to the necessity of studying and practicing diplomacy outside conventional parameters and comprehending how other actors engage and can play crucial roles in this "new" context.

In terms of practices and approaches, the government's endeavors encompassing activities, programs, and actions aimed at engaging both domestic and foreign publics—operating within the context of public diplomacy—have significantly broadened. Such an expansion is leveraged not only by state entities but also by non-state actors. Consequently, an increase in unofficial track 2 diplomacy (involving academics and specialists instead of conventional diplomats) and track 3 diplomacy (involving NGOs and worldwide citizens) emerged within multinational settings, as observed by Lam and Duerkop (2011, 4). The evolution of diplomatic efforts now encompasses various engagements spanning the economy, culture, sports, security and defense, and other spheres.

To emphasize "the significance of a comprehensive and linked approach to global affairs, the focus has shifted beyond traditional state-to-state relations to include non-state players"[2] and numerous new modalities. The fundamental goal has altered to accommodate multilateral relations and foster connections between the public and citizens through intensive interactions and regional/global outreach. Hence, in the present era, diplomacy has shifted its attention towards individuals and communities. It offers platforms where participants actively participate in dialogues, advocate for diverse causes, and wield significant influence over mutual comprehension and common goals.

This shift plays a pivotal role in crafting resolutions for entrenched divisions, particularly in post-war societies grappling with ethnic or social discord, by fostering an environment conducive to peace, dialogue, and reconciliation. In this evolving landscape, the broadened scope for engagement paves the way to innovative strategies and policies that tap into the public's thoughts and perspectives, aiming to uncover novel solutions tailored to the complexities of modern, non-traditional conflicts.

Such advancements can significantly benefit regions like the Western Balkans, which have traditionally focused on state-to-state interactions and operated mainly through track 1 diplomacy. Following violent conflicts in the 1990s, the region entered a new era characterized by extensive multilateral efforts to foster peace and collaboration. The 1995 Dayton Agreement marked the cessation of hostilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, showcasing the effectiveness of official, government-level negotiations known as track 1 diplomacy. In the years that followed, a range of efforts embraced track 2 and track 3 diplomacy, focusing on unofficial dialogue and grassroots engagement to bolster the peace process and tackle the root causes of the conflict. These efforts have faced resistance in the first decade and later on due to the complexity of conflicts, resistance to change, limited resources, the inability of these efforts to raise public awareness, and a lack of persistence or continuation at this level. Considering the configuration of the Balkan region with its past legacies that still contribute to divisions, people-to-people

[1]Anonymous (No. 04) (2024, February). Interview with a diplomat serving in the SEE region using the Google Forms questionnaire.
[2]Anonymous (No. 04) (2024, February). Interview with a diplomat serving in the SEE region using the Google Forms questionnaire.

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barriers, exclusion, hate speech, and disinformation, it is necessary to understand how relying mostly on track 1 diplomacy cannot break stagnation and effectively transform such complexities. Additionally, it can maintain the *status quo* where possible. At the same time, a multilateral and multilevel approach through a shared vision and "political will"[3] can be instrumental in connecting people and advancing future opportunities in the region.

The research goal is to thoroughly examine the historical context of traditional diplomacy operations in the Western Balkans from a regional standpoint. It explores the complex changes following the decade of conflicts and clarifies the region's apparent path toward a paradigm shift marked by greater transparency and international engagement.

International actors are actively involved in projects to aid reconciliation and integration of the Western Balkans in the European Union (EU), yet these efforts encounter significant challenges. The analysis sheds light on the development of diplomatic practices in a region that has yet to grapple with various challenges, including structural impediments, ethnic and political polarizations, and economic frailty while filtering or opposing external negative influences. Despite witnessing the adoption of new practices related to public, cultural, economic, environmental, and security cooperation, the influence of daily politics and government still shapes diplomatic discussions with a self-centric nature. The entrenched impact of traditional state-centric diplomacy in the region requires an opening to a more inclusive, multi-stakeholder practical model to promote constructive peace and cooperation. This reframing emphasizes the rise of regionalism and multilateralism, notably through diplomatic tracks involving various actors, private individuals, NGOs, and societies, to enhance understanding among diverse and divergent societal stances in the Western Balkans.

The study objective will first focus on a general introduction to "the changing nature of diplomacy" (Cooper and Cornut 2016, para. 1) to multi-track operability and the limitations existing within the scope of traditional diplomacy in a time of tremendous changes the world has faced in the last decades. Second, how much new shifts and dynamics in the diplomatic sphere can positively impact the region in the societal realm, giving rise to new initiatives through specific strategies, policies and initiatives and new ways of cooperation that could best fit in beyond governmental hostilities or disputes between states that, most of the time, lock in stagnation.

The final goal is to highlight how capillary diplomacy's regular interactions could promote openness and aid regional rapprochement while fostering cross-sectorial and cross-societal cooperation in the Western Balkans context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The prevailing view among scholars is that the political changes following the Cold War prompted a shift away from traditional diplomacy, which centered on national interest and state sovereignty, towards a more inclusive approach. The post-Cold War shift alternated new methods, tools, and mechanisms, leading space "to the emergence of regionalism and multilateralism" (Lam and Duerkop 2011, 4). Compared to the latter part of the 20th century, Melissen (2011) was one of the scholars in this decade, 2010-2020, to feature how diplomacy

[3]Anonymous (No. 03) (2024, February). Interview with a diplomat serving in the SEE region using the Google Forms questionnaire.

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developed far more quickly in the 21st century. He stressed that Public Diplomacy is at the core of its current rebooting; it is no longer a stiff waltz among states alone but rather a jazzy dance of colorful coalition. Sending et al. (2011) have also written on the future of diplomacy, emphasizing the coexistence of old and new practices in the changing diplomatic landscape. In Cooper and Cornut's (2016) examination, shifts in the institutional architecture of global governance and their repercussions on diplomacy are emphasized by delving into the evolving landscape of practices. Preceding this, Cooper et al. (2013) took a global standpoint, incorporating contributions from international authors, accentuating the significance of multilateral diplomacy from different perspectives, and offering solutions to common global challenges.

Contemporary diplomacy utilizes a diverse array of tools and practices to maneuver through the intricacies posed by many actors within the dynamic landscapes of bilateral, regional, and multilateral engagements. A central aspect of this diplomacy is the meticulous examination of the complex interconnections across various issue domains. Scott-Smith (2018) points "toward an 'upgrade' of diplomacy as a whole" (p. 1) while calling for diplomacy to adapt to a radically different global environment, where states are no longer the sole actors to set agendas for solutions, while cross-state and inter-state societal interaction and connections can no longer rely on them only. In line with these elaborations on the evolution of diplomacy, other scholars have seen the opportunities of the new tracks of diplomacy as expanded, to be exploited in the context of the Western Balkans (WB) region as channels and means to furthering *détente*, building or restoring relations, reconciliation, exchange, influencing publics and impacting governments for a better understanding and cooperation relating specific issues and fields. Luli (2015) starts in the line above to discuss the mechanisms of public diplomacy in the Western Balkans as an imperative means to mitigate conflict and enhance cooperation. Adebhar (2017) emphasizes the need for a "new Balkan diplomacy" (para. 8) led by the EU and supported by Washington to empower Western Balkan societies to rule themselves, shifting away from strongman rule or external influences. Generally, scholars of Southeast European studies have overlooked the impact of diplomatic multi-channeled practices that could improve regional social cohesion and openness. Traditional diplomacy's pace is inconsistent and sometimes counterproductive to the EU's path - these countries follow it as their main strategic goal, whereas modern diplomacy can produce more effective results. Such a logic aligns with Melissen's (2011) perspective on public diplomacy, which advocates for interactive dialogue and long-term relations. This article tries to fill the gap in the current literature by focusing on evolving strategies of diplomacy subdisciplines and especially on the curing effects of "multi-track diplomacy", a concept developed and expanded by Dr. Louise Diamond and John McDonald at the beginning of the '80s, designed for conflict resolution. All such developments can either help or be redesigned to forge a "new Balkan diplomacy", empowering citizens and fostering social regionalism because the region is often hindered by shady political practices, authoritarianism, and outdated narratives, which impede productive regional foreign policy and limit citizen engagement and participation across various fields.

Additionally, this article does not attempt to bypass the shared perspective these countries have in aspiring to join the EU, even though "too often, EU foreign policy relied on the promise of eventual membership as a sort of cure-all" (Bieber 2019, para. 3). While this approach has been somewhat practical in guiding transformations and maintaining hope for EU accession,

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its limitations are also recognized. The Western Balkan scene, especially in recent years, has been troubled and impacted by an already tumultuous geopolitical rivalry despite many EU-led projects and structures in place, such as (CEFTA, REA, RCC, and Berlin Process). Nevertheless, the EU expects candidate countries to undergo normative-political changes, including reforms, stable institutions, and economic progress. Waiting for such expectations to be met, unique characteristics and hurdles of each country and bilateral disputes often disrupt connections and rapprochement efforts. Meanwhile, the region has yet to establish a robust social foundation essential for stability. Such a foundation would facilitate integration while countering the sovereignty of state-centric foreign policies and counterproductive external influences through innovative approaches.

METHODOLOGY

This research endeavor undertakes an objective scientific investigation, adopting a liberal perspective to foster social cohesion in the Western Balkans. It aims to explore the benefits of new diplomatic instruments within emerging subdisciplines, using qualitative methods and foundational literature to analyze and assess the region's potential for the practical development of such opportunities. Although multi-track diplomacy is designed for conflict resolution and has been applied to a certain extent in the Western Balkans, it can still be redesigned with better coordination, evaluation, and communication strategies to provide opportunities through its branches to foster societal development and solidarity in the region. The study starts by recognizing the limitations of track-one diplomacy and its weak results in participatory projects starting from the beginning of the 2000s. It then expands to discuss the importance of the MTD (multi-track diplomacy) "new diagram", with its "compass design", offering through its various tracks new "resources, values, and approaches" (McDonald 2003, para. 4).

As supplements to existing literature (comprising books, scholarly journals, reports, and journal articles), integrated original data are sourced from diplomats affiliated with Southeast European (SEE) diplomatic missions. The data collection process involved conducting six in-depth interviews with the target group. The process resulted in a comprehensive and nuanced overview through their opinions regarding the regional diplomatic context and possible beneficial initiatives within the Western Balkans. Participants could remain anonymous or disclose their identities through a semi-structured Google Forms questionnaire, with those choosing anonymity denoted by codes 01 to 05 within the study. The questionnaire was emailed to approximately 12 diplomatic representatives in Albania and other Southeast European countries, with detailed explanations of the research and a specified deadline for responses. Out of the 12 diplomatic mission representatives, six responses were received within the official deadline specified in the email. The rich data collection from these six interviews allowed us to proceed with results, considering the format, structure, and requirements outlined by the journal's guidelines and word count limit. The responses served as essential expert input for the qualitative inquiry, enriching the analysis and results with diverse perspectives. The responses served as essential expert input for the qualitative inquiry, enriching the analysis and results with diverse perspectives. This enabled recommendations for a more cooperative regional environment through the novel "systems approach to peace" (Diamond 2003, para. 4).

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DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Analyzing "traditional diplomacy" requires examining its longstanding practices, which persisted for centuries before being transformed by new practices and actors in the past decades. As Berton (2024) notes, diplomacy has significantly evolved over the last fifty years due to technological advancement, globalization, and geopolitical shifts, leading to new specialized fields and collaborative models.[4] Within these changes, the rise of numerous "founded regional and intra-regional initiatives" took root "to strengthen cooperation between countries in international order".[5]

Despite initial skepticism, diplomatic cables became central to international communication in the 1860s, despite Lord Palmerston's alarmed reaction to the first telegram (Dizard 2001, 5). They evolved rapidly to integrate these new information exchanges at that time. Later, by the 1970s, the fusion of global media and international politics became pronounced, with leaders like Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau suggesting that media outlets like The New York Times could rival traditional foreign affairs institutions in information dissemination (Khanna 2011).

Still, track 1 diplomacy continues to play a central role in international relations despite the emergence of alternative diplomatic forms. The exercise of political power within the sphere of traditional diplomacy includes the establishment and maintenance of relationships, the "pursuit of compromise", the "imposition of sanctions", the "articulation of conditional statements", the "power to influence", the "threat of military force", coercive diplomacy, "access to material and financial resources", and "in-depth knowledge about the parties" (Mapendere 2000, 2). These instruments of statecraft remain deeply entrenched as states continue to employ them fervently and officially in their diplomatic affairs.

For a more informal and flexible dialogue, track 1.5 diplomacy evolved to combine elements of both tracks (track 1 and 2), bringing together government officials and non-official individuals to discuss and work on issues of mutual concern. As Homans (2011) emphasizes, track 2 diplomacy emerged from recognizing that unaffiliated private citizens could navigate toward mutual understanding, a feature often unattainable by official negotiators. In more direct terms, Joseph V. Montville, the former Foreign Service Officer who initially coined the term three decades ago in Foreign Policy, stated that "citizens could take some action rather than simply being bystanders while the grown-up governments acted like jerks" (Homans 2011). Beyond the official line, some states have already implemented extra procedures or methods because complicated situations have required these changes in operability manners and behaviors as a modus operandi that only partially follows the traditional way of diplomacy.

Louise Diamond and John W. McDonald developed and implemented the multi-track diplomacy (MTD) concept, expanding upon Joseph Montville's original differentiation between track 1 and 2 approaches to conflict resolution. This expansion involved the inclusion of additional tracks, ultimately leading to the coining of the term "multi-track diplomacy" (McDonald 2003, para. 4) (Figure 1) and the establishment of the Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy (IMTD) in 1992.

[4]Berton, B. G. (2024, January). Interview with Ambassador Bruce Berton, former Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania (June 2023 to December 2023), conducted via a Google Forms questionnaire.
[5]Anonymous (No. 02) (2024, February). Interview with a diplomat serving in the SEE region using the Google Forms questionnaire.

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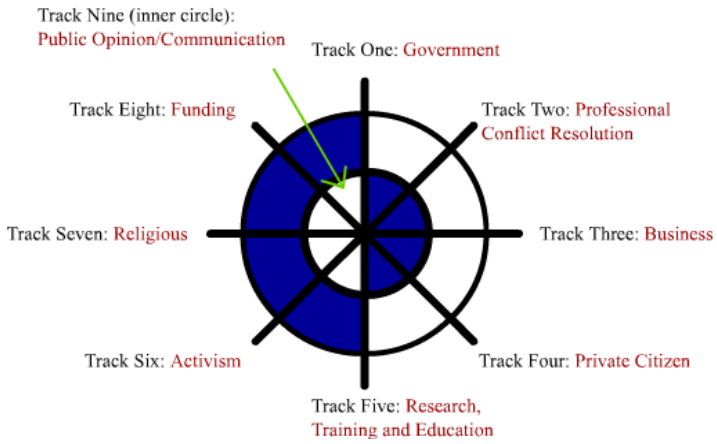


Figure 1: Multi-Track Diplomacy (Source: McDonald 2003)

Another breakthrough moment signaling the changes in diplomacy was the WikiLeaks case, which marked a shift in diplomatic confidentiality and ushered in a new era of "wiki-diplomacy". Khanna (2011) highlights the transformative potential of this approach, suggesting that "wiki-diplomacy" may have already positively impacted global cooperation through a communication channel, advocating for transparency and collaboration across traditional boundaries, engaging diverse sectors to share information, and fostering effective alliances.

In the 21st century, the landscape of international relations has been markedly reshaped by the flow of information and technological advancement, introducing novel trends and mechanisms within the domain of capillary diplomacy able to enshrine within the MTD operability procedures too, which have manifested in innovative forms of representation, communication, and engagement. Simultaneously, the effectiveness of traditional diplomatic principles has reflected frailty throughout different historical periods to grasp the extent of opportunities within this framework and their significance, especially in the Western Balkan region. This investigation underscores an ongoing discussion on how flexible or adoptable standard diplomatic methods can be in changing geopolitical landscapes while exposing the advantages of engaging in multilateral diplomacy in the Western Balkans through multi-track diplomacy.

Balkan diplomacy has perpetually been under the rule of the old thumb, and the turbulent Balkan decade after the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s had a profound and lasting impact on the region. Political rivalries, economic recession, historical animosities, and unresolved issues led to wars, exacerbated by the absence of democratic norms and human rights protocols. Resurging ethnic tensions and nationalism fueled conflicts among ethnic groups aiming for independence, while the power vacuum and political instability further intensified confrontations.

Despite being perceived as Europe's periphery, the Balkans significantly influence the continent's political, security, and economic landscape. New emerging states during this period sought international recognition and engaged in state-building efforts, echoing Jasbec's (2007, 17) view of small states pursuing acknowledgment of their existence and identity within a community alongside participation in the EU's integration initiatives.

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After three decades of transition, it is observable how Southeastern European countries still face challenges in establishing strong regional societal bonds due to internal and external limitations and past reverberations. While international support, including EU/NATO integration and reconciliation initiatives, has partly addressed this, the reconciliation process has not been accomplished yet. At the same time, transitory justice has remained in its nascent phase, facing rejections in some countries, especially from the top level.

If traditional diplomacy were the sole channel available, it would have presented a ruthless game for some Balkan leaders and frontline politicians. When the chapter on positive peace was opened, the US-EU played a very constructive role through coordination and incentives. However, they still rely primarily on political leadership to enact changes in this sphere. Despite the duo's efforts in the region for three decades, Bosnian-Herzegovinian society still lives in divisions into three entities and suffers from ethnic and political divisions. Kosovo and Serbia dialogue is the principal concern and a hot-button issue between the two countries, posing escalation risks not only to the Balkan region but to the EU bloc, too. The dialogue needs to reinvigorate based on the Franco-German proposal, advancing on an implementation map with a more robust and efficient intermediary role of the EU. Until recently, the EU facilitating role between the parties has shown to be challenging, considering the back and forth of the whole dialogue process for many years.

Brussels bears a great responsibility in dealing with the issue, and what counts in this case is the future of the societies in a more stable region. Adebahr (2017) proposes a "new Balkans' diplomacy" that empowers Western Balkan citizens to better rule themselves rather than succumbing to strongmen or external forces. Nevertheless, this can be achieved parallelly with Balkan leaders assuming their responsibilities and promoting regional peace from the level of actions, discourse, and dialogue.

History has shown the unpredictable Balkans grappling with recurring political unrest and nationalist tensions, jeopardizing regional stability. Tcherneva (2021) emphasizes Serbia's political interference, challenging post-war peace agreements and evoking memories of 1990s conflicts. This nationalist push, combined with authoritarian leanings and alliances with Russia and China, creates a precarious climate, risking Balkan destabilization. These longstanding issues are compounded by an incomplete reconciliation process, a "work in progress" (Andreychuk 2018, 2) that impedes regional stability and EU integration.

The devitalization of the EU process has created an opening for external actors to operate according to their own rules and ambitions, intervening wherever feasible and contributing to a Balkan form of populism "characterized by the strengthening of the power and political influence of populist leaders from the 1990s, whose populist rule is increasingly taking the form of autocracy" (Visio Institut 2023). These prominent leaders have maintained long-term power, prioritizing control over public welfare through "top-down" populism and indoctrination (Brentin and Trošt 2016, 10). Despite signs of moderation and two decades in the state of stabilitocracy, the Euro-Atlantic axis should consistently support state-building and stable democracies in the Western Balkans. The revival of ethnic nationalism by confident leaders, as highlighted by Mankoff (2017), is present through exploiting unresolved conflicts to redirect public dissatisfaction from corruption and economic stagnation. Balkan leaders must finally realize how to reconcile their efforts with multi-track-diplomacy practices and other innovative strategies. They must embrace international law principles and reconciliation models to promote

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societal growth and overcome historical divisions, fostering a forward-looking, unified vision for the future. The post-conflict phase in the Western Balkans was supposed to open a new chapter in interethnic relations and generally among states and societies. However, the traditional diplomacy formula is never out of fashion in a region with over 30 years of conflict, where there is a substantial lack of openness and transparency. Although new means of media and technology could benefit communication with the broader public, more awareness is needed to utilize these new diplomatic branches as they offer extended ways of interaction and negotiation.

An example of the perpetuation of the track1 diplomacy was the Open Balkan Initiative, launched in 2019. Beginning as a "mini-Schengen" project, it was a leadership effort by three Western Balkan countries (Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia) aimed at fostering regional integration. It served as a bridging phase and a junction point on the path to EU membership. However, this Initiative did not receive considerable enthusiasm and consent from other states and a substantial portion of the citizenry due to a lack of trust at the core of the project and inclusivity among the participating countries and other parallel EU initiatives in the region that apply the same principles and goals.

THE RISE AND FALL OF TRACK 1 DIPLOMACY EFFORTS IN THE OPEN BALKAN INITIATIVE

The traditional diplomatic protagonism has been observed in recent years through the Open Balkan Initiative (OBI). This Initiative revived (track 1) diplomacy conduct and was seen as a locally driven effort, sparking concerns due to Southeast Europe's complex historical, political, social, and economic challenges. As discussed in a previous article by Luli (2022)[6] , despite these challenges and critiques, Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia continuously pushed for regional integration through this project, culminating in creating the Open Balkan (OB) in July 2021. This initiative was a specific reaction to the crises within the European Union and the stagnation of membership prospects, particularly following the obstruction of Albania and North Macedonia in 2019 from initiating accession negotiations. It signaled a desire for Balkan-led solutions to fulfill shared goals and aspirations as they appeared elusive toward the bumpy path to EU accession. Given the Western Balkans' varied foreign relations alignments, economic disparity, bilateral disputes, and other interests, the Open Balkan Initiative's effectiveness and final results were fiercely debated during this endeavor. Another source of concern was the lack of inclusivity it appeared to have as other members refused to take part in it.

During the Open Balkan phase, leaders drew parallels with the EU project, claiming the same success was possible in this scenario, too. However, there are differences in how the EU project was implemented "under an overarching umbrella" (Joseph 2022) of supranational institutions. The EU's cooperation was based on a functionalist approach. France and Germany, at the state and political levels, fulfilled the obligations of the post-WWII period, while the OBI overlooked such commitments. The strained relations between France and Germany led to the 1951 Treaty of Paris, which established the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC).

[6]Part of the analysis presented in this section is an appropriated and reformulated analysis of the author's (Elira Luli) prior work, originally published as "'Ballkani i Hapur' dhe dritëhijet që e shoqërojnë …" ["'The Open Balkan' and its accompanying complexities"], published on 10 June 2022, in *Opinion.al*, available at: https://opinion.al/ballkani-i-hapur-dhe-dritehijet-qe-e-shoqerojne/

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In contrast, the OB still faces trust-related divergence, stemming from historical events and perpetuated by particular states-driven nationalism and narrow national interests, impacting integration and international justice commitments. European unity's sustainability and enduring peace hinged on fostering a lasting reconciliation between France and Germany after WWII in 1945, in the Potsdam Conference, which shaped Germany's future, entailing complete disarmament, dissolution of the Nazi party, denazification, war criminal trials, and reparative actions. The decisions made at Potsdam indirectly influenced France's position in post-war Europe and its relationship with Germany. In 1946, major war criminals faced trial in Nuremberg under Allied judges, prompting Germany to acknowledge its guilt.

After WWII, Vonyó (2019, para. 9) argues that the Marshall Plan, implemented in 1948, was instrumental in ensuring post-war political stability. It achieved this by reducing the influence of communist parties, backing the centrist government, creating a Western alliance to limit Soviet expansion, and restoring West Germany's standing internationally. Such a vision is unlikely to merge in some Western Balkans countries at a political level. Between 1945 and 1963, following the culmination of these processes, a conviction emerged that entrenched animosity could evolve into a successful reconciliation, now enshrined in the EU's primary pillars upheld by these two states. Meanwhile, in the Western Balkans, the lack of concerted political efforts and a unified vision to initiate social justice and progress obscures opportunities for cooperation by perpetuating a politics of oblivion and failing to move beyond past stages.

Serbia's firm rejection of Kosovo's independence complicates transitional justice efforts. In some contradictive terms, Serbia's invitation to Kosovo to join the Open Balkan elicited diverse speculations of showing potential will toward an "implicit recognition", but such a position would be in contradiction with the stalled Brussels dialogue of many years, highlighting Serbia's hesitancy to fulfill agreements and attach more seriously to a complete European alignment while being closely related to Russia. Joseph (2022) points out that supporters of the Open Balkans also failed to address the region's economic inequalities. He also questioned the idea of "trade equals trust", arguing that trade's effect and results highly depend on a regime's nature—its democratic or authoritarian leanings. While trade among Western democracies can yield political gains, Joseph suggests this does not hold in the case of the Western Balkans, considering the current context. Considering the influence of actors other than the European Union (EU) and the United States (US), speculation quickly arose about whether Russia was backing this initiative. This speculation exacerbated the continuity of the Open Balkan project, leading to heightened doubts, particularly at the societal level in some states.

Moreover, ambiguity surrounded whether this project would supersede, replace, extend, or operate concurrently with ongoing EU initiatives. The EU's current initiatives (CEFTA, Berlin Process, Common Regional Market) are pivotal for progress, reforms, and guiding the involved parties, while all six states should remain actively involved.

Given the current transitional weak outcomes at the domestic level, the region's "facere-it-te" or "do it yourself" political strategy has raised skepticism about the benefits and effectiveness of Balkan leadership at the regional level. The "people in the region who want to live in societies based on the West's proclaimed liberal values see that their capitals and leadership are on the side of illiberals and autocrats" (Bassuener 2023, 5).

Leaders who fail to be progressive at the domestic level can hardly be successful at the regional level, as in recent years, some regional incidents and autocratic tendencies have

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indicated limited collaboration and vision for regional progress. Such events undermine the root of similar initiatives, such as OB, as occurrences and practices conflict with its "genuine" objectives.

Moreover, despite US and EU mediation attempts, Belgrade and Pristina still maintain conflicting positions, contrary to the Ohrid Agreement's cooperation framework. Regrettably, the EU's efforts to normalize relations between Serbia and Kosovo, agreed upon in March 2023, have yielded unsatisfactory results. The events in Banjska involving a guerrilla group further complicated diplomatic efforts. They raised "the possibility of further violence" and regional destabilization" (Trajkovic 2023, para. 5), jeopardizing the whole region. As Bassuener (2023, 5) points out, in this geopolitical competition that spans the entire region, leaders who harbor unrealized nationalist goals—whether they seek separation or dominance—are more emboldened and self-assured than they were when they previously pursued these objectives through military force. In such conditions, distrust may deepen at the societal and among states level, showing some autocrats seizing opportunities to fulfill ambitions at regional plans coupled with local power consolidation practices. These ongoing tensions leave societal scars and will profoundly impact and worsen public sentiment. Trajkovic (2023) warns that rushed solutions risk undermining democracy and human rights, while an existing resolution framework, based on German and French ideas (Ohrid framework), calls for the immediate, excuse-free implementation of the agreement. However, since the positive peace stage for multilateral engagement was opened, the region's poor planning and incoherent policies have fostered apathy. This environment has, once again, fostered forces that drive toward violence and destruction (Figure 2).

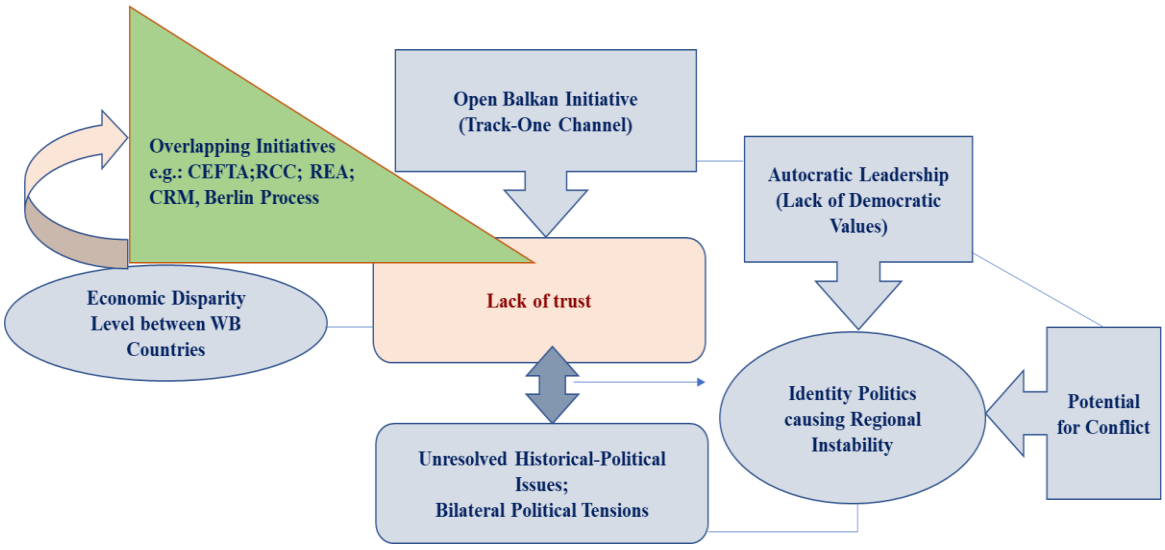


Figure 2: Open Balkan: Challenges, Leadership Dynamics, and Overlap with EU Initiatives (Source: Authors' depiction)

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Figure 2 represents the challenges and doubts surrounding the OBI. Although it was presented as a significant shift in regional dynamics following an EU model, with Balkan leaders taking a more active role in shaping their destiny, this shift has raised questions about the underlying interests and the potential impact on the current context of the region.

Irrespective of the outcome of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, even if it progresses optimally, the region is in dire need of initiatives that not only encompass and reflect values, contributions, and policies rooted in multi-track diplomacy but also serve to establish robust foundations and mutual understanding and cooperative gains among societies. In turn, such advancements can empower them to build natural deterrence against the detrimental agendas of specific irresponsible leadership that hark back to the notorious history of the Balkans. The European Union is still the only common destination for all six Western Balkan countries, as it holds significant leverage for regional transformation and a development model. However, efforts have often focused on injecting the European model from an external rather than an internal regional perspective. Nevertheless, the "fulfillment of the obligations arising from the Stabilization and Association Agreement for each Western Balkan country"[7] is imperative, backed up and energized by numerous diplomatic initiatives. The latest events demonstrate that "the progression of the Western Balkans depends significantly on the determined political volition of the region's leaders"[8] political agenda. At the same time, societies become distant or follow the narrative lines set by politics and media.

Post-war Europe has a successful model of how it shifted to a bold multilateral engagement within the framework of an ever-widening peace while track 2 diplomacy was active. In the Balkans, the lack of "human and economic development, education, and jobs, but also ineffective governance and the rule of law" forces the young generation to leave (Adebhar 2017). The region lacks substantive citizens-led initiatives through "citizens diplomacy", empowering "individuals with strong reputations in arts, music, sports, media, academia, and communication" (Adebhar 2017) to be more influential and vocal for peaceful relations. As "the concept of MTD is closely connected with the whole-of-society approach" (Dudouet and Dressler 2016, 5), these new ways would be innovative and immediate for the region. After a decade of conflicts, since the end of the '90s, the EU has been supporting "peace processes" to "facilitating dialogue processes with civil society organizations" (Youngs 2014; Davis 2014).

Nevertheless, reports show that "the civic sphere in the Western Balkans is contracting" and "more anti-liberal governments are justifying their restrictive policies towards CSOs" (WB2EU 2023) while citizens are segregated and less engaged, plagued by high migration rates. The Balkan Barometer (2022, 17) reveals that citizens primarily engage in decision-making and political life through social networks or discussions with friends, citing feelings of powerlessness, distrust, and a lack of responsibility toward their governments. Such a decrease in awareness and lack of participation at the grassroots level "might diminish the political performance of populist leaders or those elected on fraudulent electoral processes".[9] These are worrisome trends that need to be addressed starting from the grassroots level; even though the results at this level may be more modest, the commitment will have long-term and far-reaching value.

[7]Anonymous (No. 05) (2024, February). Interview with a diplomat serving in the SEE region using the Google Forms questionnaire.
[8]Anonymous (No. 03) (2024, February). Interview with a diplomat serving in the SEE region using the Google Forms questionnaire.
[9]Anonymous (No. 02) (2024, February). Interview with a diplomat serving in the SEE region using the Google Forms questionnaire.

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DISCUSSION

Diplomacy in the 21st century is characterized by a need for flexibility, inclusivity, and a recognition of the diverse range of actors shaping international relations(Berton 2024).[10] The world becomes multipolar as new regional powers emerge, undermining traditional superpower hegemony. This shift necessitates diplomats to navigate through a fluid alliance landscape, where partnerships are issue-based rather than fixed, demanding high adaptability to the dynamic geopolitical environment.[11]

Conversely, in the Western Balkans (WB) context, this might not be "a problem of track-one diplomacy per se"[12] but merely a problem of leadership approach in exercising diplomatic practices and relations because it relates to the concern" whether these leaders have been elected through a genuinely fair electoral process and if their election is based on populist rhetoric and nationalistic ideas".[13]As the Western Balkans Civil Society's Call to Action (2022) notes, reconciliation has regressed due to a lack of support from WB political leaders, and the EU agenda for reconciliation has ceased.

Third parties influence this region through economic, political, cultural, and religious connections. However, "the region's unique history means that while the EU model cannot be directly applied, it may be adapted to fit the local reality".[14] Overcoming the struggle with historical acceptance may require a blend of traditional and modern diplomatic efforts. Berton (2024) notes that unresolved issues from past conflicts like the Bosnian and Kosovo Wars hinder regional cooperation due to ongoing nationalism-related issues and minority rights disputes. Hence, establishing joint security mechanisms to address common challenges is always necessary. In such a frame, "a regional early warning system, supported by international and neighboring allies, is crucial for conflict prevention, mediation, and peacebuilding.[15] Diplomatic strategies targeting younger generations, such as parliamentary diplomacy, could be effective, given legislators' direct engagement with the populace.

Effective channels in this regard remain "cultural diplomacy with the potential to strengthen interpersonal relationships by using common arts, cultural traditions, and history to heal historical wounds".[16] Economic diplomacy with "collaborative economic ventures that promote interdependence"[17] can be beneficial not only for deeper economic integration but also for strengthening relationships. Platforms for regional dialogue must involve multiple actors in facilitating discussions between ethnic communities, addressing grievances, and the need for "historical revaluation"[18] to ease concerns and foster a shared perspective of the past.

[10]Berton, B. G. (2024, January). Interview with Ambassador Bruce Berton, former Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania (June 2023 to December 2023), conducted via a Google Forms questionnaire.
[11]Berton, B. G. (2024, January). Interview with Ambassador Bruce Berton, former Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania (June 2023 to December 2023), conducted via a Google Forms questionnaire.
[12]Anonymous (No. 02) (2024, February). Interview with a diplomat serving in the SEE region using the Google Forms questionnaire.
[13]Anonymous (No. 02) (2024, February). Interview with a diplomat serving in the SEE region using the Google Forms questionnaire.
[14]Anonymous (No. 01) (2024, February). Interview with a diplomat serving in the SEE region using the Google Forms questionnaire.
[15]Berton, B. G. (2024, January). Interview with Ambassador Bruce Berton, former Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania (June 2023 to December 2023), conducted via a Google Forms questionnaire.
[16]Anonymous (No. 04) (2024, February). Interview with a diplomat serving in the SEE region using the Google Forms questionnaire.
[17]Anonymous (No. 04) (2024, February). Interview with a diplomat serving in the SEE region using the Google Forms questionnaire.
[18]Anonymous (No. 04) (2024, February). Interview with a diplomat serving in the SEE region using the Google Forms questionnaire.

In promoting good governance, it is necessary to "advance legal and governance reforms for a robust rule of law and transparent institutions, and offer training to enhance public administration and fight corruption" (Berton 2024).[19]

In most cases, leadership initiatives have yet to be pursued with a plan or goal to build public opinion and public relations in favor of peace-making and good neighborly relations. Hence, in the contextual plan, "it is more an issue of democracy and politics, as the diplomacy derives from the ones".[20] Diplomatic efforts in the region have focused on direct, bilateral problem-solving, with multilateral approaches emerging when driven by international or integrative pressures. Throughout the 34-year transition period, the region still needs a concerted, feasible approach to engaging all essential stakeholders, encompassing governments, civil society, and citizens. The regional cooperation instrument "is the path the EU and the Balkan countries have embraced to improve their mutual relations". At the same time, the Berlin Process, in line with possible entrenching and expanding MTD initiatives, "can be an essential instrument of progress, especially if it continuously ensures active involvement from regional states (such as Austria, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, and Greece) and the EU and USA to meet commitments and avoid the neglect seen in the 2020s".[21]

Given the region's tumultuous past, "the reconciliation model" feasibility hinges on meeting international law standards for transitional justice while building active societal preparation to counter nationalist and irredentist ideologies from historically rooted political issues. The EU "must take tangible steps towards integrating the region, rather than solely sticking to its model and inadvertently neglecting the region"[22] because if it overlooks the changing geopolitical landscape, especially in light of the Russia-Ukraine war, further destabilization may follow.

CONCLUSION

This research holds significant implications for understanding the evolving nature of diplomacy and how it can shape new directions of cooperation, citizen rapprochement, and exchange, particularly in the Western Balkans region.

Adaptations in diplomacy reflect the dynamic evolution of international relations, responding to global shifts and changes. International relations theories and meta-theories provide frameworks for understanding global events, power transitions, and conflicts. These theories are valuable for understanding potential future scenarios, but no single theory remains universally applicable. Similarly, diplomatic channels are continually evolving and can be effective in forging partnerships and driving practical change, often reaching beyond the traditional influence of governments.

Acknowledging the hindrances encountered in the form of a stalled reconciliation process due to inadequate backing from political leaders in the Western Balkans and a sluggish EU agenda, external actors are consistently poised to capitalize on these impasses and exert

[19]Berton, B. G. (2024, January). Interview with Ambassador Bruce Berton, former Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania (June 2023 to December 2023), conducted via a Google Forms questionnaire.
[20]Anonymous (No. 02) (2024, February). Interview with a diplomat serving in the SEE region using the Google Forms questionnaire.
[21]Anonymous (No. 02) (2024, February). Interview with a diplomat serving in the SEE region using the Google Forms questionnaire.
[22]Anonymous (No. 01) (2024, February). Interview with a diplomat serving in the SEE region using the Google Forms questionnaire.

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influence on the Western Balkans through economic, political, cultural, and religious ties, representing complex avenues for intervention. Hence, the findings underscore the value of grassroots initiatives in post-conflict environments with the support of horizontal actors. Post-conflict societies frequently resist top-down regional integration and reconciliation initiatives because of the perception that such efforts are inauthentic, externally imposed, and insufficiently equipped to tackle the intricate and deeply entrenched issues that underpinned the conflict. Conversely, grassroots initiatives are often viewed as more genuine and effective, as they originate from within the communities rather than being mandated by political leadership. In an environment where there are unresolved historical narratives, a lack of social justice, and inadequate representation, bottom-up approaches to peacebuilding can be more naturally suited to recognizing past injustices and laying the groundwork for future top-down interventions through fostering a sense of ownership and agency among community members, which is essential for sustainable peace and reconciliation.

Policymakers and practitioners must recognize and better evaluate efficient MTD initiatives while adapting to changing circumstances in the region. Effective MTD requires raising public awareness and communicating its goals and progress. Without clear communication, the public may not support or engage with the initiatives. This is crucial in a region where countries must resolve all bilateral issues before becoming part of the EU.

The analysis and arguments do not suggest circumventing track 1 diplomacy approaches in post-war/conflict societies. Instead, they advocate for reevaluating these practices by supporting them if they align with similar objectives or independently evolve into more effective paradigms. These advancements require recognizing the constraints of traditional state-centric diplomacy and promoting regional strategies and collaborative initiatives for such post-conflict environments. Furthermore, the research in frames of proposing new ideas and venues stresses a win-win formula, where intellectuals, academics, diplomats, civil society, and other actors can contribute to grassroots movements in multiple ways and enhance a participatory model through multi-channeled grassroots interventions redesigned to advance the peace-making process, consensus-based cooperation, providing a renewed commitment. It introduces a new scheme for promoting positive rapprochement by establishing a Forum, Center, or Institute with a two-year presidency mandate to apply multi-track diplomacy principles and goals. This innovative approach offers a new and expanded way of thinking about the research problem, emphasizing the importance of inclusive, multi-stakeholder engagement through creating a more inclusive environment for fostering community unity and value-based conditions with equal benefits, ultimately contributing to the region's sustainable future.

Effective aid depends on coordinated efforts between the EU, the US, and other positively interested stakeholders.

The Western Balkans urgently require leaders and media able to confront historical taboos and adopt new perspectives. Such efforts are crucial for integrating societies living in perpetual limitations by past narratives. Immediate attention through funds and technical dedication through programs and exchanges through ("people-to-people" contact) is imperative. These efforts require a mixture of traditional and modern diplomacy to adopt a mutually beneficial diplomatic strategy aligned with EU and NATO goals, particularly in areas where collaboration has been limited or absent. Systematic intervention is essential, prioritizing youth engagement to instill a sense of unity and cooperation.

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Furthermore, facilitating horizontal-level exchanges can demonstrate intellectual commitment to cooperation by introducing innovative solutions for greater acceptance and sharing. The continuous highlighting of the benefits of EU membership is essential to inspire reform, engage youth, promote accountable governance, and commit to European principles and values. A regional media collaboration is crucial to ensure unbiased reporting, counteract misinformation, and enhance intercultural communication. Scholarly research and projects that aid the Western Balkans in reclaiming their cultural identity and history are crucial for fostering positive regional identity and advancing reconciliation and acceptance.

After reviewing the contextual analysis and results, a key question emerges: How can the multi-track diplomacy diagram, initially designed for conflict resolution, be strategically readopted and repurposed as an invaluable framework for promoting positive peacebuilding in post-war/conflict societies within the Western Balkans region? As mentioned above, the recommendation for establishing a new Institute or Centre with a two-year presidency mandate can be put into motion and expand on the multi-track diplomacy principles and goals through the abovementioned programs. Including Southeast European countries that are members of the EU in this Initiative would enhance the sharing of expertise and experiences, fostering greater inclusivity. This Forum could integrate within existing regional structures or operate independently as a specialized structure for multi-track diplomacy aimed at citizens. Leadership within this structure should comprise individuals with a robust activism background, notable achievements across diverse fields, or/with high academic, institutional, and diplomatic standing. During their term, these leaders would be expected to craft a strategic plan focusing on reconciliation and fostering capillary connections among societies and youth through tangible programs and initiatives they would execute while in office.

The programs could be adjusted in duration as needed, ensuring continuity even later when new figures assume the next presidency after two years term.

Ideally, if the presidency is held in country X, the best option would be for the president/leader to hail from countries Y or Z within the region. The institution may have a stable or rotating presidency, but all countries must have their representatives on a rotating basis.

This mission, transitioning from foundational principles to widespread program implementation at the societal levels, holds paramount significance in the region.

The existing diagram of multi-track diplomacy (Figure 1) redesigned for fragmented post-war societies and regions grappling with deep-rooted societal tensions could function the same way, starting newly designed programs by collaborating, when necessary, with respective governments (track 1) to facilitate programs and initiatives.

Involving essential stakeholders by stepping into (track 2) for mediation and discussions through designed initiatives can promote awareness through various campaigns on the benefits of peace and coexistence. Initiating economic endeavors with experienced prominent business figures (track 3) can help, through their expertise, to support emerging entrepreneurs and promote and circulate their products in the region's market. Engaging private citizens (track 4) as influential messengers, utilizing their platforms to host regional audiences, enhances outreach, a shared understanding, and impact.

Furthermore, the center should encourage and fund mid-career researchers and young scholars (track 5) with a research background and interest in such topics to conduct research

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pertinent to the center's mission to advance with projects in various subbranches and have a far-reaching effect.

Activism (track 6) permeates all tracks, underscoring their tangible importance because it is all about activism in all channels.

Special initiatives promoting cultural diversity within activities related to religion (track 7) are crucial, emphasizing religion as an aspect of religious coexistence tightly associated with freedom of expression and not as a divisive factor among individuals or societies with varying beliefs and faiths.

Adequate funding (track 8) is essential to meet and fulfill MTD's goals, requiring contributions from participating governments, philanthropists, visionary business figures, esteemed academic institutions, and international partners.

Lastly, effective communication (track 9) is pivotal for coordinating these interconnected efforts, aiming to educate the public with a forward-thinking perspective on shared destiny through achieving prosperity, peace, and stability. Communication should serve as the primary conduit for this center to not only disseminate information on achievements but also amplify the voices of citizens and youth, addressing their needs and ideas beyond political biases and media influence. In such a way, the center/mission/institute can organize and operate, putting in motion all tracks where constituent subbranches are translated into programs and initiatives raised and implemented by continuous ideas. The reinvigoration of citizens can enhance their potential for regional solidarity and forge their barriers against populist and nationalist dictate. Moreover, such a structure is essential for fostering community unity and cross-channel collaboration in the Western Balkans, enhancing the efforts of other regional initiatives.

Influenced by invested allies and pertinent stakeholders aiming to advance this plan, it has the potential through well-designed strategies, policies, and programs to push the EU's goals and engagement in regional integration, fostering coordination and collaboration on a mutually beneficial basis and societal reconciliation through active rapprochement and exchange.

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CRediT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Elira Luli: conceptualization, methodology, writing-original draft (lead), reviewing and editing, and supervision. **Mirela Metushaj:** writing-original draft (supporting), interview process (lead), interview findings analysis and data curation.

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