
EDITORIAL

Adaptive Territorial Governance in the Face of Uncertainty and Transitions

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Introduction

Over the last decade, the European Union (EU) has taken a strong stance in relation to climate change and become a leader in tackling the ever-evident global climate crises. In June 2021 the EU adopted a European Climate Law, establishing the aim of reaching net zero greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) in the EU by 2050. Different funding mechanisms such as the European Regional Development Fund, Cohesion Fund, as well as a series of sectorial legal changes and framework strategies, such as the EU Green Deal, support these actions. Undoubtedly, the dawn of this 'green decade' is fundamental to building climate resilience in Europe.

In this context, the EU member states have already instigated an intensification of efforts towards a green and just transition, while also working to evolve and develop governance approaches for resilience. The effects of climate change will translate to an increasing number and frequency of disasters related to natural hazards that will place European society under greater pressure and stress. In order for efforts to materialize into actions that fully address societal and ecosystem needs, stakeholders should develop coordinated, comprehensive, and integrated approaches, where citizens and bottom-up initiatives play a vital role. For the transition(s) to endorse the 'resilience' principle, a paradigm shift is necessary. This shift should empower citizens and other non-government stakeholders to take an active and prominent role in the governance of resources and socio-technological transformations.

The six Western Balkan (WB) countries have been on the verge of EU integration for the past few years. Fatigue with a prolonged integration process and internal development challenges are fostering a milieu conducive to increasingly autocratic and centralized governments taking hold throughout the WB6 countries. As a result, reforms have not advanced equally among countries or sectors, often lagging behind for matters that, regardless of their undisputable importance, are considered by the WB6 governments as less urgent. While the WB6 countries have access to considerable support and funding every year for achieving the Copenhagen Criteria, they pay less attention to resilience and a green transition.

Considering the limited capacities, path dependency from past autocratic regimes, and the (perceived) high costs of resilience building and making a green transition, policy agendas in the WB6 are and continue to remain dominated by states policies, with minimal societal involvement in decision-making. Often justified with the absence of financial capacities to address the costs of the green transition in a context where knowledge on benefits is also scarce, this green transition agenda does not rank high in the governments' priorities. The current actions for a green transition move at a slow pace and do not enable a meaningful societal transformation, mostly paying lip-service to the green transition agenda and allowing activities on the ground to continue being business-as-usual. With community actions and bottom-up initiatives being rather weak and not integrated within any comprehensive endeavors, the policy narratives on a green transition remain at the level of framework national documents with a low impact.

However, the Western Balkans, particularly the coastal areas, will be heavily impacted by climate change. Referring to the Risk Inform Index developed by the European Commission, countries in the WB6 have both the highest hazard exposure in Europe and the lowest disaster coping capacity. In other words, as climate change impacts manifest in disasters of higher frequency and magnitude, it is these countries in Europe that will face the largest challenges. Considering their low coping capacities, the development of climate-resilient systems, alongside green transitions, should be a high priority for these countries.

Similar to the green transition, the same logic applies to civil protection and climate disaster risk reduction. Efforts to manage civil protection remain de facto centralized. The paradigm shift from emergency response to risk reduction and management with resilience building is in an embryonic phase. Legislation and structures are mostly in place, providing for a decentralization of functions, but human and financial resources are still insufficient, particularly for addressing preparedness and resilience building. This centralization of effort in disaster risk reduction is due mostly to the lower capacities and resources of the local governments, but also to a tendency of central government to aim to control and coordinate better information, resources, and outcomes. Such a governance model tends to be rigid, without offering the necessary flexibility to deal with disaster risk through a place-based approach. While the WB6 countries have yet to close the economic development gap with EU-member states, the prospect of higher risks and future crises looms large, contributing to deepening spatial disparities and socio-economic vulnerabilities. This, in turn, nourishes the conditions for centralized and autocratic government models to thrive, leading to more complex internal dynamics, further delays in the fulfilling of the Copenhagen criteria, and a significantly challenging path towards adopting open and fair governance systems. To date, a general dichotomy is observable between EU-wide actions and attempts to develop resilient socio-ecological systems, including in the Western Balkans, and the risk for WB6 countries to fall even further behind.

This issue attempts to share examples of efforts in policies and actions in and around the Western Balkans, or relevant to it, that implicitly or explicitly address key aspects of the green transition and disaster risk reduction in the dynamic and complex context of EU integration and development from a spatial perspective, and considering that:

- Resilience and the green transition are the new battle horse of the EU in the quest for global leadership on climate change. Besides an explicit and official inclusion in the Copenhagen criteria, resilience and a green transition are values to be embraced and shared by all societies in Europe.
- There is a gap between EU and WB6 in the level of effort, capacities, and approaches for dealing with the green transition and resilience building measures. To close the gap, knowledge of WB territorial systems (as geographical and social constructs and of territorial governance) is necessary and should be shared by actors in the EU and in the WB6.
- Mechanisms to empower new groups of stakeholders and bottom-up initiatives in tackling the green transition and resilience building are needed. Such mechanisms should be found or created locally to reflect the WB6 context.

Finally, while EU values and beliefs on a green transition and resilience building should be channeled towards the WB6, the current, relevant EU frameworks are not yet able to successfully penetrate the regional context and allow or promote the empowerment of new and bottom-up stakeholders and initiatives. The articles in this issue point to the direction of catalytic interventions in territorial governance, which contribute to speeding up the EU integration of the WB6, this time with a particular focus on resilience and a green transition.