

# DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Besim Kamberaj \*

\* Signum Magnum College, Signature Portomaso Business Centre, St. Julian's, Malta  
Contact details: Signum Magnum College, Signature Portomaso Business Centre, Portomaso, St. Julian's, STJ 4011, Malta



## Abstract

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The Western Balkans continue to face persistent challenges, including fragmented economies, institutional fragility, and environmental vulnerability, despite decades of integration efforts. However, existing research often addresses regional cooperation, economic integration, or sustainability in isolation, creating a gap in understanding how these dimensions interact to shape long-term development (Sanfey & Milatović, 2019; Zeneli, 2014). This study addresses this problem by developing a multidimensional framework for sustainable regional development that systematically integrates these three interdependent pillars. Using qualitative document analysis of 39 policy reports, academic studies, and civil society contributions (Bowen, 2009), the research identifies key barriers including fluctuating political will, uneven governance, and policy fragmentation alongside opportunities in civil society engagement, innovative financing, and European Union (EU) aligned collaboration (Draçi et al., 2022; Bartlett et al., 2022). The findings demonstrate that economic integration cannot succeed without parallel governance reforms, and that sustainability must be embedded as a foundational principle rather than an add-on. By bridging this gap, the study contributes both a theoretical synthesis and a practical roadmap for policymakers and stakeholders to harmonize economic, institutional, and environmental reforms in the Western Balkans.

**Keywords:** Western Balkans, Regional Development, Regional Cooperation, Economic Integration, Sustainability

**Authors' individual contribution:** The Author is responsible for all the contributions to the paper according to CRediT (Contributor Roles Taxonomy) standards.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkans occupy a distinctive position in Europe, marked by a mosaic of cultural identities, complex histories, and diverse economic realities. Over the past three decades, the pursuit of sustainable regional development has become increasingly critical for the region's stability, prosperity, and aspirations toward European Union (EU) integration. Existing studies have documented

persistent challenges, including fragmented economies, institutional fragility, political volatility, and environmental pressures (Draçi et al., 2022; Sanfey & Milatović, 2019; Zeneli, 2014). At the same time, scholars and policymakers acknowledge the transformative potential of cross-border cooperation and integration strategies to foster stability and shared growth (Bartlett et al., 2022; European Commission, 2020). This approach aligns with the EU's Economic and Investment Plan

designed to accelerate post-pandemic convergence (European Commission, 2020).

Despite this growing body of research, a clear gap remains. Most studies analyze either regional cooperation, economic integration, or sustainability in isolation, rather than examining how these dimensions interact to shape long-term development trajectories. This fragmented approach has hindered the design of coherent and actionable strategies for the Western Balkans. Furthermore, recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and energy shocks have exposed the extent to which weak governance and fragmented policy responses exacerbate vulnerabilities across sectors (Jakimovska, 2023; Tosuni & Misini, 2023). Recent Regional Cooperation Council (RCC, 2024a) and RCC (2024b) surveys reveal that while public optimism toward regional integration is growing, perceptions of governance efficiency remain mixed.

This study addresses that gap by proposing a multidimensional framework that explicitly integrates regional cooperation, economic integration, and sustainability as mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable regional development. The central research question guiding this work is:

*RQ: How can regional cooperation, economic integration, and sustainability be harmonized to support long-term, resilient development in the Western Balkans?*

The conceptual foundation of the study is informed by the governance–development nexus perspective, which emphasizes that institutional quality underpins both economic integration and sustainable growth (Keil, 2013; Bartlett et al., 2022). Building on this theoretical lens, the research systematically synthesizes insights from policy documents, academic contributions, and civil society perspectives to construct an integrative framework. The findings are designed to advance scholarly understanding while also offering practical implications for policymakers, international partners, and regional stakeholders (Bajraktari et al., 2023; Geci & Hoxha, 2025).

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on regional cooperation, economic integration, and sustainability. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, including data collection, coding, and analysis. Section 4 presents the results across the three thematic pillars, supported by tables and figures. Section 5 discusses the findings in light of existing scholarship and highlights theoretical and policy implications. Section 6 concludes with a summary of contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans

Regional cooperation has long been considered a cornerstone of stability and sustainable development in the Western Balkans. Scholars emphasize that trust-building and overcoming historical animosities are critical to advancing coordinated development (Draçi et al., 2022; Qerimi & Sergi, 2008; Andreev, 2009). Persistent political fragmentation and incomplete reintegration have

historically constrained cooperation (Seroka, 2008; Draçi et al., 2022). Bregu (2024) highlights that initiatives such as the Open Balkan and Regional Common Market often depend heavily on the intensity of EU engagement, with fluctuating momentum tied to changes in Brussels' political priorities.

However, institutional weaknesses and inconsistent political commitment continue to undermine practical outcomes (Podgórzńska, 2018). Minić (2013) cautions that externally imposed models risk superficial compliance, while Keil (2013) and Sklias and Tsampra (2014) connect cooperation to broader processes of democratization and cross-border business integration. Recent studies confirm that political volatility and domestic fragmentation remain major obstacles to regional trust (RCC, 2024b).

Despite persistent challenges, literature converges on the need for institutional depth, legally enforceable mechanisms, and inclusion of civil society as stabilizing actors. The gap lies in longitudinal assessments of regional initiatives and integrated models that capture both external incentives and local agency.

### 2.2. Economic integration: Opportunities and constraints

Economic integration is widely recognized as essential for convergence with EU standards. Bartlett (2010) emphasizes that the region's path toward economic convergence has been historically constrained by institutional weaknesses and uneven social welfare reforms, underlining that market liberalization alone cannot ensure stability without broader institutional alignment. Sklias (2011) further explores the political economy of regional integration, arguing that incomplete regulatory harmonization and low institutional trust continue to constrain the region's capacity to benefit from open markets. Sanfey and Milatović (2019) show that trade facilitation and regulatory alignment reduce costs and improve resilience. Ilahi et al. (2019) highlight weak participation in global value chains as a structural barrier while Citaku et al. (2020) emphasize that underdeveloped banking supervision and limited financial integration undermine macroeconomic stability. Bartlett et al. (2022) assess EU investment plans, noting that governance bottlenecks and political uncertainties limit spillover effects. Önsoy and Udum (2015) further underline the strategic role of energy connectivity and regional partnerships particularly the engagement of Turkey in strengthening the Western Balkans' economic and energy security, which remains a critical dimension of integration. More recent works underline the macroeconomic and sectoral challenges of the region. Jakimovska (2023) and Svrčinov et al. (2020) show that the COVID-19 crisis and subsequent energy shocks deepened existing economic disparities across the Western Balkans while simultaneously generating new momentum for institutional reform and regional integration. Tosuni and Misini (2023) evaluate the uneven economic performance of the Western Balkan countries, stressing the role of governance in shaping competitiveness. Bajraktari et al. (2023) provide empirical evidence that trade freedom significantly impacts growth across the region, reinforcing

the importance of reducing non-tariff barriers. Sklias (2012) expands on these dynamics by identifying persistent failures in regional business development, linking them to fragmented coordination among national policies and limited innovation capacity.

At the same time, financial innovation and sustainability-oriented financing tools remain underdeveloped. Lukšić et al. (2022) point to the potential of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) linked bonds and blended finance but caution that effectiveness depends on regulatory quality and institutional transparency. Geci and Hoxha (2025) extend this debate by linking research and development (R&D) to gross domestic product (GDP) growth, showing that investment in innovation is a missing driver of regional convergence.

The consensus is that integration is a necessary but insufficient condition for growth. Institutional fragility, fragmented markets, and low absorptive capacity of external funds remain binding constraints. Future research must examine the interplay between governance reform, market liberalization, and innovation ecosystems.

### 2.3. Sustainability: Environmental and social dimensions

Sustainability has moved to the center of development debates but remains unevenly integrated into policy. Cela et al. (2022) argue that sustainable tourism and cultural heritage can serve as branding tools, though risks of fragmentation remain. Nadazdi et al. (2022) and Castanho et al. (2022) highlight persistent gaps in circular economy adoption, waste management, and urban planning oversight. Harms et al. (2010) identified weak innovation systems as a barrier to green transition, a challenge that remains today. Recent contributions stress the urgency of linking sustainability with broader governance reforms. For example, Dimitrijević et al. (2023) emphasize the neglected role of agriculture and rural development, while the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2018) and Record et al. (2025) reports call for integrated monitoring of environmental and economic indicators. EU-funded projects have helped strengthen local capacities (Tošović-Stevanović & Ristanović, 2016), but monitoring mechanisms remain inconsistent. New empirical studies extend this perspective. Geci and Hoxha (2025) argue that R&D investment is also crucial for environmental innovation, while regional analyses stress the role of civil society and local initiatives in advancing sustainability agendas (Tosuni & Misini, 2023).

The literature consistently points to a policy-practice gap. Sustainability is present in strategic documents but poorly operationalized, often treated as an “add-on” rather than a structural principle. Future approaches should focus on embedding environmental and social priorities into governance and economic policy frameworks.

### 2.4. Integrative gaps and research directions

Across these strands, the main gap lies in the lack of integrated, multi-level frameworks combining regional cooperation, economic integration, and sustainability. Existing studies are fragmented and often sector-specific, limiting their ability to guide holistic policy. This paper addresses this gap by proposing a multidimensional framework that synthesizes institutional, economic, and environmental dimensions of development in the Western Balkans.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009; Vaismoradi et al., 2016) within a phenomenological orientation to explore sustainable regional development in the Western Balkans. Document analysis is particularly suitable for this question, as it enables systematic examination of diverse perspectives embedded in policy reports, academic literature, and civil society contributions.

### 3.2. Sampling and data collection

Documents were purposively selected to ensure broad coverage of the study’s three core themes: regional cooperation, economic integration, and sustainability. Inclusion criteria required 1) direct relevance to the Western Balkans, 2) publication between 2010 and March 2025, and 3) substantive engagement with at least one of the analytical themes. Sources included EU and government policy papers, peer-reviewed academic works, international organization reports, and non-governmental organization (NGO)/think-tank analyses. Only English-language documents were included to ensure comparability. A detailed source log is provided in Table A.1, in the Appendix.

### 3.3. Data management and coding

All selected documents were catalogued in an Excel-based database, including author, year, type, source, access date, and assigned theme. Coding followed best-practice qualitative research guidelines (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bowen, 2009). After familiarization, open coding was conducted inductively, followed by axial coding to group categories under the three thematic pillars. Cross-cutting codes, such as civil society engagement, were tracked across themes. Although NVivo was considered, coding was conducted manually in Excel due to the manageable number of sources and the need for iterative, fine-grained engagement with the material. Reliability was enhanced through memo writing and peer debriefing with academic colleagues (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Table 1.** Thematic coding framework for regional development in the Western Balkans

<i>Main theme</i>	<i>Sub-theme</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Description</i>
Regional cooperation	Institutional trust and capacity	Cross-border trust	Trust between countries, willingness for collaboration
	Policy coordination	Regional initiatives	Assessment of initiatives (Open Balkans, Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), etc.)
	EU Alignment	EU integration barriers	Obstacles to accession and integration
	Governance	Political instability	Political change, unrest, and inconsistent leadership
	Stakeholder engagement	Civil society engagement	NGO, grassroots roles in fostering cooperation
Economic integration	Market and trade access	Trade barriers	Tariff/non-tariff barriers, market fragmentation
	Labor market integration	Labor market gaps	Unemployment, skill mismatches, and low mobility
	Infrastructure development	Flagship projects	Major infrastructure (transport, digital, energy)
	Competitiveness	Global value chain participation	Position in international supply chains
	Regulatory quality	Governance challenges	Transparency, institutional strength/weakness
	Financing mechanisms	Innovative financing tools	Use of ESG bonds, blended finance, etc.
Sustainability	Environmental policy	Green transition	Renewable energy, decarbonization, and eco-innovation
	Urban and spatial planning	Unregulated urban growth	Urban sprawl, planning failures
	Resource management	Circular economy practices	Recycling, waste management, resource efficiency
	Ecological impacts	Environmental degradation	Pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate impacts
	Stakeholder participation	Civil society engagement	NGO/public input in environmental policy

Note: This table summarizes the structured coding scheme used during document analysis. It categorizes codes into sub-themes and overarching themes (regional cooperation, economic integration, and sustainability), aligning with the analytical framework of the study.

### 3.4. Alternative approaches

While document analysis provided a broad, multi-perspective foundation, alternative methods could also have been suitable. Semi-structured interviews with policymakers, civil society leaders, and business representatives would have yielded context-specific insights. Surveys could have captured public perceptions of integration, while case studies could provide depth on specific initiatives (e.g., the Open Balkan or Regional Common Market). A mixed-methods design combining document analysis with primary data collection could further triangulate findings. Future research may employ such methods to validate and extend the framework proposed here.

### 3.5. Transparency and ethics

All analyzed materials were publicly available, and no personal or sensitive data were collected. The coding schema, thematic framework, and document log (Table A.1, Appendix) are included to ensure transparency and replicability.

## 4. RESULTS

The results of this research provide an in-depth analysis of the key challenges and drivers shaping sustainable regional development in the Western Balkans. The findings are organized by the studies' three core themes, regional cooperation, economic integration, and sustainability, and directly reflect the objectives and research questions outlined in the introduction. Data were synthesized from a structured coding and thematic analysis of 36 core documents, including policy reports, peer-reviewed articles, and strategic frameworks.

**Table 2.** Coded variables and thematic mapping from the document corpus

<i>Code</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Sub-theme</i>	<i>Main theme</i>
Cross-border trust	Level of trust among Western Balkans (WB) countries	Institutional capacity	Regional cooperation
Regional initiatives	Participation in joint programs	Policy coordination	Regional cooperation
EU integration barriers	Specific obstacles to EU alignment	EU alignment	Regional cooperation
Political instability	Instances of political volatility	Governance	Regional cooperation
Civil society engagement	Role in cooperation, policy input	Stakeholder engagement	Regional cooperation/sustainability
Trade barriers	Types and impacts of market restrictions	Market & trade access	Economic integration
Labor market gaps	Issues of unemployment, skills, and mobility	Labor market integration	Economic integration
Flagship projects	Infrastructure and digitalization initiatives	Infrastructure development	Economic integration
Global value chain part	Involvement in international supply chains	Competitiveness	Economic integration
Governance challenges	Regulatory issues, transparency	Regulatory quality	Economic integration
Innovative financing tools	Use of bonds, ESG mechanisms	Financing mechanisms	Economic integration
Green transition	Renewable/eco-innovation projects	Environmental policy	Sustainability
Unregulated urban growth	Issues with planning, rapid expansion	Urban and spatial planning	Sustainability
Circular economy practices	Waste, recycling, and efficiency measures	Resource management	Sustainability
Environmental degradation	Pollution, loss of biodiversity	Ecological impacts	Sustainability

Note: This table illustrates the operationalized codes assigned to the 36 analyzed documents, linking each to specific sub-themes and main themes. It represents how qualitative data were categorized for synthesis.

#### 4.1. Regional cooperation

Persistent institutional barriers: Despite strong policy rhetoric, the practical implementation of regional cooperation remains inconsistent. Many initiatives, such as the Open Balkan and the Regional Common Market, have suffered from fluctuating political will and varying levels of commitment among member states (Bregu, 2024).

Trust deficit and fragmented governance: Cross-border trust is often undermined by historical grievances, changing governments, and competing national priorities, limiting the effectiveness of multilateral projects (Draçi et al., 2022; Keil, 2013).

Civil society as a bridge: Non-governmental organizations and grassroots actors have played a critical but underutilized role in fostering dialogue and regional trust, particularly where formal mechanisms stall (Minić, 2013).

**Table 3.** Major regional cooperation initiatives and implementation challenges

<i>Initiative</i>	<i>Countries involved</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Key barriers identified</i>
Open Balkan	Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia	Partial	Political divergence, legal gaps
Regional Common Market	All WB6	Ongoing	Fragmented implementation, mistrust
Berlin Process	All WB6, EU	Ongoing	EU dependency, fluctuating engagement

Source: Adapted from Bregu (2024) and Minić (2013).

A recurring trend is the intense initial enthusiasm for regional frameworks, followed by a decline in momentum due to changing political conditions and limited institutional follow-through.

#### 4.2. Economic integration

Structural disparities: The Western Balkans face persistently high unemployment, low labor mobility, and significant gaps in infrastructure when compared to the EU average (Bartlett et al., 2022; Zeneli, 2014).

Limited market and value chain access: Regional economies remain relatively isolated from global value chains. Trade integration and export diversification are below EU levels (Ilahi et al., 2019).

Flagship projects with uneven impact: EU-backed infrastructure and digitalization projects show promise but are often hampered by governance bottlenecks and fragmented market regulations (Bartlett et al., 2022).

Financial innovation still emerging: While there is rising interest in ESG-linked financing and sustainability bonds, uptake remains slow due to regulatory uncertainty and market immaturity (Lukšić et al., 2022).

**Table 4.** Key economic indicators (2022–2023) estimated

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>WB average</i>	<i>EU average</i>	<i>Gap</i>
Unemployment rate (%)	13.5	6.8	+6.7
GDP per capita (USD)	7,200	38,000	-30,800
Trade integration index	0.48	0.78	-0.30

Source: Data is updated from recent findings, including Bartlett et al. (2022) and Jakimovska (2023).

These indicators highlight the economic disparities between the Western Balkans and the EU average, emphasizing the need for targeted development strategies. Regions with better infrastructure are directly related to those with higher trade and investment activity, supporting the literature's call for coordinated investment and governance reform.

have resulted in environmental stress and widening socio-economic gaps (Cela et al., 2022; Castanho et al., 2022).

Slow adoption of circular economy: Although policy frameworks for circular economy and green growth exist, their implementation is limited by capacity constraints and low stakeholder engagement (Nadazdi et al., 2022).

Role of civil society: Environmental NGOs play an increasingly important role in advocacy and policy monitoring, but integration of civil society into formal planning remains partial (Cela et al., 2022).

#### 4.3. Sustainability

Environmental degradation and urban sprawl: Unregulated urbanization and weak spatial planning

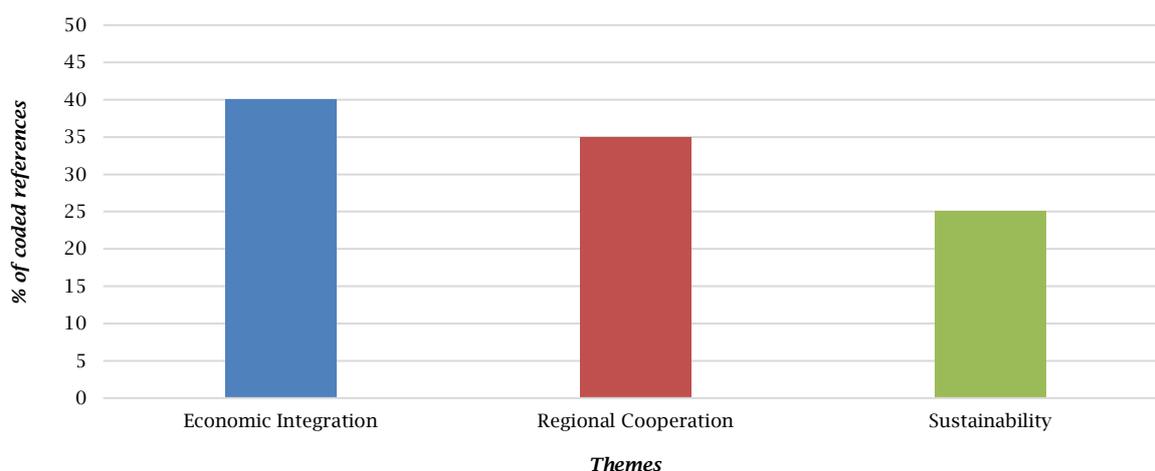
**Table 5.** Status of sustainability initiatives

<i>Sustainability theme</i>	<i>Policy presence</i>	<i>Implementation level</i>	<i>Key constraints</i>
Circular economy	High	Low	Institutional & data gaps
Green infrastructure	Moderate	Low-moderate	Funding, policy coordination
Urban planning reform	Moderate	Low	Fragmented responsibilities

Source: Nadazdi et al. (2022), Cela et al. (2022), and Castanho et al. (2022).

Environmental priorities are more present in policy than practice, with implementation lagging

due to weak governance and limited multi-stakeholder engagement.

**Figure 1.** Distribution of main themes (based on coding)

Note: A bar chart visually shows economic integration as the most emphasized theme, with regional cooperation and sustainability also prominent. The percentages reflect the relative emphasis on these themes within the analyzed documents. This distribution highlights the primary focus areas for regional development in the Western Balkans and aligns with findings from Bartlett et al. (2022) and other key studies.

#### 4.4. Patterns, trends, and anomalies

Pattern: Economic and governance bottlenecks often intersect; regions with more stable institutions report better results from EU-funded flagship projects.

Trend: While enthusiasm for regional cooperation is high, follow-through is limited by national politics and capacity.

Anomaly: Some small municipalities show leadership in circular economy and green transition despite limited national-level support, indicating a potential for “bottom-up” innovation (Nadazdi et al., 2022).

#### 4.5. Summary of significance

The results reveal a strong need for integrated, cross-sectoral approaches combining economic, governance, and sustainability priorities.

Persistent institutional weaknesses and inconsistent policy implementation are significant obstacles to sustainable regional development.

Civil society’s role is emerging as a critical but under-leveraged asset for regional cooperation and sustainability.

### 5. DISCUSSION

This study examined the mechanisms and barriers of regional cooperation, economic integration, and sustainability in the Western Balkans to develop a multidimensional framework for sustainable regional development. The findings confirm that while political rhetoric and policy ambition remain strong, institutional fragility, fluctuating political will, and fragmented governance consistently undermine implementation.

For regional cooperation, results highlight the recurring gap between symbolic commitment and practical delivery. Initiatives such as the Open Balkan, the Regional Common Market, and the Berlin Process demonstrate initial enthusiasm but often lose momentum due to domestic political volatility and weak institutional depth. As Bregu (2024) notes,

regional cooperation frequently correlates with cycles of EU engagement, with progress slowing when external incentives weaken. This study reinforces earlier critiques (Minić, 2013) that emphasize the risks of externally driven integration without durable legal frameworks and trust-building mechanisms. Sustainable cooperation requires institutionalized enforcement combined with greater involvement of civil society actors to ensure continuity across political cycles.

In terms of economic integration, governance challenges such as regulatory fragmentation, weak labor mobility, and uneven absorptive capacity continue to constrain convergence with EU standards. These findings align with Sanfey and Milatović (2019) and Bartlett et al. (2022), who argue that market reforms alone are insufficient without parallel institutional strengthening. The region also lags in financial innovation. Although there is growing interest in ESG-linked bonds and blended finance, uptake remains limited by regulatory weaknesses and market immaturity (Lukšić et al., 2022). Without governance reform, even flagship EU investments risk delivering only partial or uneven spillover effects.

Regarding sustainability, the analysis reveals a persistent policy-practice gap. Circular economy initiatives, green transition policies, and urban planning reforms are increasingly visible in strategic documents but remain weakly implemented. Civil society organizations play a growing role in environmental advocacy and local innovation, yet they are underutilized in formal planning structures. Bridging this gap requires embedding sustainability into governance and economic development strategies, rather than treating it as an add-on (Cela et al., 2022; Nadazdi et al., 2022).

The results underscore the interconnectedness of the three pillars, with governance quality emerging as the central determinant across domains. Stronger governance enhances the durability of cooperation frameworks, the effectiveness of economic integration, and the operationalization of sustainability. This reinforces systemic perspectives that call for multi-level governance approaches,

combining EU-level alignment with locally embedded solutions (Keil, 2013; Bartlett et al., 2022).

Theoretically, this study contributes by developing a multidimensional framework that integrates political, economic, and environmental perspectives. It advances existing research by moving beyond siloed analyses and demonstrating that governance integrity, institutional trust, and stakeholder inclusivity are foundational for sustainable development in the Western Balkans.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that regional policymakers must design durable legal instruments that transcend electoral cycles, economic strategists should link market reforms to labor and governance improvements, and environmental planners must integrate sustainability into core planning processes. Donors and international partners should prioritize capacity-building and tie funding to governance reforms, while also supporting innovative financing mechanisms to unlock green and inclusive growth.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the conditions under which the Western Balkans can advance toward sustainable regional development through enhanced regional cooperation, economic integration, and sustainability. Drawing on qualitative document analysis of 39 policy, academic, and civil society sources, the findings show that persistent institutional fragility, fluctuating political will, and fragmented governance remain the main barriers to progress. At the same time, opportunities exist in EU-supported reform agendas, innovative financing mechanisms, and civil society engagement that can serve as catalysts for long-term resilience.

The study makes two key contributions. Theoretically, it proposes a multidimensional

framework that integrates political, economic, and environmental dimensions of development. This advances scholarship by moving beyond siloed analyses and demonstrating that governance quality is the central determinant across all three pillars. Practically, it provides a roadmap for policymakers and stakeholders, highlighting the need to institutionalize cooperation mechanisms, align economic reforms with governance and labor policies, and embed sustainability into mainstream planning.

Policy implications include the need for durable legal instruments that transcend electoral cycles, stronger links between EU integration and domestic institutional reforms, and the integration of circular economy and green transition strategies into economic development agendas. Donors and international partners should prioritize capacity-building and accountability while also supporting innovative financing, such as ESG-linked bonds, to advance inclusive and sustainable growth.

The study has some limitations. It is based on secondary sources and does not include primary data collection such as interviews or surveys. Future research could adopt mixed-methods approaches to triangulate findings, conduct comparative case studies across Western Balkan states, and assess the long-term impact of flagship regional projects on institutional capacity and development outcomes.

In conclusion, sustainable regional development in the Western Balkans requires more than sector-specific reforms. It demands synchronized progress across institutions, economies, and environmental systems, anchored in strong governance and inclusive stakeholder participation. If these interdependencies are strategically addressed, the region can move closer to building a resilient, cohesive, and sustainable future within the broader European context.

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## APPENDIX

Table A.1. Source log (Part 1)

No	Author(s)	Type	Source	Access date	Main theme(s)
1	Andreev (2009)	Journal article	<i>Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies</i>	November 2024	Regional cooperation
2	Bajraktari et al. (2023)	Journal article	<i>Corporate &amp; Business Strategy Review</i>	November 2024	Economic integration
3	Bartlett (2010)	Journal article	<i>Southeastern Europe</i>	November 2024	Economic integration
4	Bartlett et al. (2022)	Policy report	European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies	November 2024	Economic integration, sustainability
5	Bowen (2009)	Journal article	<i>Qualitative Research Journal</i>	November 2024	Qualitative research
6	Braun and Clarke (2006)	Journal article	<i>Qualitative Research in Psychology</i>	November 2024	Qualitative research
7	Bregu (2024)	Journal article	<i>Academicus International Scientific Journal</i>	November 2024	Regional cooperation
8	Castanho et al. (2022)	Journal article	<i>Journal of Urban Development and Management</i>	December 2024	Sustainability
9	Cela et al. (2022)	Journal article	<i>Enlightening Tourism. A Pathmaking Journal</i>	November 2024	Sustainability
10	Citaku et al. (2020)	Journal article	<i>International Journal of Economics and Business Administration</i>	November 2024	Economic integration
11	Creswell and Poth (2018)	Book	SAGE Publications, Inc.	November 2024	Qualitative research
12	Dimitrijević et al. (2023)	Journal article	<i>International Review</i>	December 2024	Economic integration, sustainability
13	Draçi et al. (2022)	Journal article	<i>Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development</i>	December 2024	Regional cooperation
14	European Commission (2020)	Policy paper	European Commission	April 2025	Economic integration, sustainability
15	Geci and Hoxha (2025)	Journal article	<i>Risk Governance and Control: Financial Markets &amp; Institutions</i>	April 2025	Economic integration, sustainability
16	Harms et al. (2010)	Journal article	<i>International Journal of Business and Globalisation</i>	December 2024	Sustainability, economic integration
17	Ilahi et al. (2019)	Policy paper	International Monetary Fund	December 2024	Economic integration
18	Jakimovska (2023)	Journal article	<i>European View</i>	December 2024	Economic integration
19	Keil (2013)	Journal article	<i>Nationalities Papers</i>	December 2024	Regional cooperation
20	Lukšić et al. (2022)	Journal article	<i>Energy, Sustainability and Society</i>	December 2024	Economic integration, sustainability
21	Minić (2013)	Journal article	<i>International Issues &amp; Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs</i>	December 2024	Regional cooperation
22	Nadazdi et al. (2022)	Journal article	Sustainability	December 2024	Sustainability
23	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2018)	Report	OECD	April 2025	Economic integration
24	Önsoy and Udum (2015)	Journal article	<i>Europe Journal</i>	December 2024	Sustainability
25	Podgórzńska (2018)	Journal article	<i>Reality of Politics</i>	December 2024	Regional cooperation
26	Qerimi and Sergi (2008)	Journal article	<i>World Review of Entrepreneurship, Management and Sustainable Development</i>	December 2024	Regional cooperation, economic integration
27	Regional Cooperation Council (RCC, 2024a)	Report	RCC	April 2025	Regional cooperation, economic integration
28	Regional Cooperation Council (RCC, 2024b)	Report	RCC	April 2025	Regional cooperation, economic integration
29	Sanfey and Milatović (2019)	Book chapter	Western Balkan economies in transition: Recent economic and social developments	December 2024	Economic integration

Table A.1. Source log (Part 2)

No	Author(s)	Type	Source	Access date	Main theme(s)
30	Seroka (2008)	Journal article	<i>Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans</i>	December 2024	Regional cooperation
31	Sklias (2012)	Journal article	<i>International Journal of Trade and Global Markets</i>	December 2024	Economic integration
32	Sklias (2011)	Journal article	<i>International Journal of Business and Economic Sciences Applied Research</i>	December 2024	Economic integration
33	Sklias and Tsampra (2014)	Journal article	Economic crisis in Europe and the Balkans: Problems and prospects	December 2024	Regional cooperation, economic integration
34	Svrtinov et al. (2020)	Journal article	<i>Journal of Economics</i>	December 2024	Economic integration
35	Tosuni and Misini (2023)	Journal article	<i>Journal of Governance &amp; Regulation</i>	December 2024	Economic integration
36	Tošović-Stevanović and Ristanović (2016)	Journal article	<i>Megatrend Revija</i>	December 2024	Regional cooperation
37	Record et al. (2025)	Report	World Bank Group	April 2025	Economic integration sustainability
38	Vaismoradi et al. (2016)	Journal article	<i>Nursing &amp; Health Sciences</i>	December 2024	Qualitative research
39	Zeneli (2014)	Journal article	<i>Connections: The Quarterly Journal</i>	December 2024	Economic integration