

# Supporting Democratization and Reconciliation Process in the Western Balkans

Supported by International Visegrad Fund

**Authors:** Egzona Bokshi, Teodora Lađić, Samir Beharić, Nikola Kandić, Klajdi Kaziu, Andi Emini, Andrijana Paljušević, Aljoša Krajišnik, Emina Balota, Andrijana Lazarević, Ilija Djugumanov

## Raising Awareness about the Role of the EU in the Western Balkans and Potential Accession

### Introduction

The EU and the Western Balkans (WB6) have to renew mechanisms for cooperation. This will enable acceleration of the accession process and the implementation of highly necessary reforms towards the achievement of desired standards for us, young people and other citizens in the region.

Hence, the Conference on the Future of Europe is an opportunity to create a genuine dialogue between European citizens and institutions regarding the future of Europe and the big challenges of our time. Europe needs to take the reins and deliver on issues that lie at the heart of citizens' interests at the economic, social, health and security level – at the European, national, and local level, and beyond its borders. In view of the challenges the EU currently faces, the need to advance European integration has become more pertinent than ever. The name of the Conference itself echoes the necessity of encouraging and including – in a formal settlement – the contributions from governmental and non-governmental representatives of European countries which are not members of the EU, with a special focus on the Western Balkans.

Building upon the EU's long-standing promise of full accession, as well as, their incremental exposure to and engagement with a set of European legal norms, structures, policies and programmes, the Western Balkans societies should enjoy the political right of proportionally influencing the process and outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

A set of consecutive crises, socio-economic obstacles, depopulation, climate change and now the COVID-19 pandemic have shown few major implications. First of all,

the globalisation process and parallel regionalism in the European continent have made it impossible to keep the aforementioned crises under control and prevent their spreading. Hence, we saw a spill-over effect beyond the current EU borderlines. Secondly, regional and global crises seek the same unified response. Although WB6 are solely the EU's partner within the accession process, both need to acknowledge the requirement for mutual support and cooperation due to their interdependence.

However, the development of complex social, political and economic realms has found fertile ground in the region, whereby the EU has manifested diminishing appetite for a leadership role and largely inadequate response. This is becoming increasingly evident, particularly considering the negative trends regarding the democratisation of certain WB6 societies together with the rise of authoritarianism<sup>1</sup> resembling the nationalistic politics whose dangerous rhetoric still haunts the region. It is necessary to underline that the responsibility lies predominantly with the WB6. Recent proposals for border redrawing<sup>2</sup> in WB6 are clear red flags of still existing “ghosts from the past” that led to wars in the 1990s. In this paper, we wish to draw attention to the reemergence of inter-ethnic issues causing new instabilities in already dangerous soil. We believe that peace as a supra value, without which there is no prosperous environment, needs to be preserved. Yet, this is where WB6 and the EU must be more present.

On top of the socio-economic situation, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, youth with growing instabilities have little incentive for not fleeing the region. Furthermore, negatively supported by environmentally hazardous places, the region is slowly falling off the EU radar. This paper addresses these burning issues as key cornerstones to further development in our societies, where the role of

<sup>1</sup> Zselyke Csaky, “Nations in Transit 2020: Dropping the Democratic Facade,” Freedom House, accessed April 25, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade>.

<sup>2</sup> Daria Sitosucic and Robin Emmott, “Unofficial EU Note on Redrawing Balkan Borders Causes Angst in Bosnia,” Reuters, April 16, 2021, accessed April 25, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/unofficial-eu-note-redrawing-balkan-borders-causes-angst-bosnia-2021-04-16/>.

the EU, not only its engagement with WB6, has not been visible enough.

In order to raise the prospects for an effective contribution of the Western Balkans into the Conference on the Future of Europe process, there arises a need for a comprehensive and regionally owned strategy, which shall entail the governments, as well as the citizens of the WB6. Such a political strategy would advance the Western Balkans credentials as not simply a beneficiary but simultaneously a benefactor to the European project. Nonetheless, for such an initiative to gain momentum, shared political drive and strategy are required from all the region's governments and institutions.

## Multiculturalism and Brain Drain

Due to its geographical location at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, the Western Balkans has been the so-called melting pot of civilisations for centuries. The resulting mosaic of cultures, religions and ethnicities has become one of the characteristic features of the region. Historically, the Western Balkan region has lived in the tension between each other, but at the same time, countries share a lot of common values together. As a result of political nationalism and other open disputes, the risk of losing this cultural connection between the youth inside the region is immensely increasing.

Since the Western Balkans Summit in Sofia and the new methodology for the accession negotiations from 2020, the EU has renewed its approach towards the Western Balkans, aiming at advancing regional cooperation, boosting socio-economic recovery and converging with the EU standards.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the pre-accession assistance measures, one of the main tools for EU integration, has significantly contributed to the democratisation and reconciliation process in the Western Balkans.

The EU has been the largest donor in the Western Balkans for more than two decades. Financial assistance allocated under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance

between 2007 and 2020 (IPA I and IPA II) was €23.2 billion. At the same time, the new IPA III for 2021-2027 will allocate more than €14 billion.<sup>4</sup> However, there is a lack of awareness and perception of the WB6 population on the importance of the EU and its financial assistance. The perception of the EU assistance programs has faced challenges in certain parts of the Western Balkans, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the valuable heritage of a diverse set of EU programs available to WB6 is not adequately promoted to people who do not believe in the idea of a united Europe.

With the rise of nationalism, right-wing movements and Euroscepticism across the continent,<sup>6</sup> our region is not excluded from these deteriorating trends. These are further accelerated by the narratives and sensitivities of the 1990's wars and inter-ethnic intolerance.<sup>7</sup> The series of wars and conflicts catalysed the largest migrations of the population in the Balkans, when hundreds of thousands of civilians, particularly ethnic minorities, were forced to flee from the direct consequences of armed conflicts and persecution at the hands of state and non-state actors.<sup>8</sup> Others fell victim to forced transfers and deportations pursued under a fierce campaign of ethnic cleansing and genocide in a war where displacement was both a consequence and an objective of warfare. With a significantly changed demographic picture of the area, the region is currently in a period of negative peace.<sup>9</sup>

Ethnic intolerance and divisive narratives, united with the inadequate economic-financial conditions, are also endangering the future of the young population in WB6. Approximately 56% of the young population in WB6 are unsatisfied with tolerance and respect of differences,<sup>10</sup> and more than 30% consider leaving the region in a pursuit for a better life in EU countries.<sup>11</sup>

Young people (aged 15 to 30) are an important resource for the future of the Western Balkans as they form around 20% of the WB6 population.<sup>12</sup> Yet, unemployment rates among young people (15-24 years old) have remained high and persistent throughout the Western Balkans for years. Across the region, unemployment rates range from

3 European Commission, "Western Balkans Summit in Sofia: Important Steps Taken to Advance Regional Cooperation to Boost Socio-Economic Recovery and Convergence with the EU," European Commission, November 10, 2020, accessed April 25, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_2051](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_2051).

4 European Commission, "Overview - Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance," European Commission, December 6, 2016, accessed April 25, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/instruments/overview\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/instruments/overview_en).

5 Aleksandar Ivković, "Perception of EU Aid amidst the Pandemic Faces Challenges across the Western Balkans," European Western Balkans, April 17, 2020, accessed April 25, 2021, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/04/17/perception-of-eu-aid-amidst-the-pandemic-faces-challenges-across-the-western-balkans/>.

6 Richard Wike et al., "The European Union," Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, October 14, 2019, accessed April 25, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/14/the-european-union/>.

7 Jenny Nordman, "Nationalism, EU Integration, and Stability in the Western Balkans," Institut für Friedensforschung und Sicherheitspolitik an der Universität Hamburg, 2015, accessed April 25, 2021, <https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/yearbook/english/15/Nordman-en.pdf>.

8 Andrew Clapham, "Non-State Actors (in Postconflict Peace-Building)," Postconflict Peace-Building: A Lexicon, February 9, 2009, 200–212, accessed April 25, 2021, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1339810](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1339810).

9 Claske Dijkema, "Negative versus Positive Peace," Irenees.net, 2007, accessed April 25, 2021, [http://www.irenees.net/bdf\\_fiche-notions-186\\_en.html](http://www.irenees.net/bdf_fiche-notions-186_en.html).

10 Regional Cooperation Council, "Balkan Barometer," www.rcc.int, accessed April 25, 2021, <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/results/2/public>.

11 Eurostat, "Main Tables," Eurostat, 2011, accessed April 25, 2021, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/population-demography-migration-projections/data/main-tables>.

12 Velina Lilyanova, "Youth Challenges and Opportunities in the Western Balkans," European Parliament, 2017, accessed April 25, 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/608683/EPRS\\_BRI\(2017\)608683\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/608683/EPRS_BRI(2017)608683_EN.pdf).

24% in Montenegro to about 55% in Kosovo\*.<sup>13</sup> Further affected by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the WB6 economies are in an enormous decline leading to increased youth unemployment and a scarcity of job opportunities. Hence, the situation leads to a lack of adequate incentives to stay in the region and creates a fruitful environment for emigration. In all, this results in depopulation and a massive *brain drain*.

Between 2013 and 2018, the number of people who moved long-term from the Western Balkans to the European Union almost tripled—from 55,797 to 161,247 people.<sup>15</sup> The overall working-age population in the region has declined by more than 400,000 individuals in the last five years.<sup>16</sup> Despite increasing awareness of the long-term consequences of migration in the region, the spatial movements have not stopped. In the long run, the loss of qualified workers and the shortage of skills may have adversely affected competitiveness, growth, and economic convergence.

However, socio-economic factors are not the only reasons that are encouraging young people to leave. In recent years, the Western Balkans have become an environmental hotspot with—amongst other issues—air too harmful to breathe, floating landfills clogging the rivers, and small hydropower plants destroying the natural habitat. Young people have become more vocal about various environmental threats that have motivated them to protest, take action or leave the region.<sup>17</sup>

## Environment

While governments in the EU struggle to reduce air emissions to maintain air quality standards harmful pollution travels into the EU from coal power plants located in the Western Balkans, a fact that is often overlooked. This pollution comes mainly from the region's fleet of old and hugely polluting coal power plants. The EU countries most impacted by Western Balkan coal pollution are those directly adjoining them. These are often the same EU countries that are already failing to meet clean air

standards, in turn making it much more difficult to design local action plans to clean up the air. The air knows no borders, which is why it is vital to adhere to environmental protection frameworks, as envisioned by the *European Green Deal* and the Paris Agreement. Hence, an increase in energy efficiency and energy production from renewable sources, as well as to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, should be the main guiding principles.

One of the best illustrations about the gravity of the air pollution threat in the Western Balkans is the fact that eight out of ten most polluting coal power plants in Europe are located in the Western Balkans.<sup>18</sup> For example, 16 Western Balkans plants pollute as much as 250 EU plants, and in 2016 the coal power plant Ugljevik in Bosnia and Herzegovina polluted as much as all of the coal power plants in Germany. Air pollution comes at a high health price for the citizens of the Western Balkans since air pollution shortens life expectancy on average by 0.4-1.3 years.<sup>19</sup>

With the aspiration of becoming the first carbon-neutral continent, the EU has committed to leading by an example in international negotiations, whose principal aim is to enhance the level of responsibility and ambition when it comes to substantive reduction of carbon emission.<sup>20</sup> Being an integral part of the continent, the Western Balkans face a series of issues ranging from the damming of rivers, to wild landfills, deforestation, and air pollution; the latter places the cities of the WB6 on top of many lists of the most polluted cities in Europe.<sup>21</sup>

The environmental aftermath of armed conflict is still affecting the entire region. Over the last couple of years, international organisations and local partners have been working to identify and reduce transboundary environmental risks from hazardous mining operations in the region. However, the conclusions have been limited. Landmines pose a serious threat to the environment, livelihood and process of sustainable development, affecting not only present but also future generations because they contribute to soil degradation, deforestation,

13 This name does not prejudice the status of Kosovo and is in line with UN Resolution 1244 and the decision of the International Court of Justice on Kosovo's declaration of independence.

14 World Bank Group and The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, "Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2019," The World Bank, 2019, accessed April 25, 2021, <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/351461552915471917/pdf/135370-Western-Balkans-Labor-Market-Trends-2019.pdf>

15 Eurostat, "First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship," [appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu), 2021, accessed April 25, 2021, [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr\\_resfirst&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_resfirst&lang=en).

The figures refer to the total number for six Western Balkans partners of all 12 months or over first permits.

16 Regional Cooperation Council, "Bregu: Brain Drain the Biggest Challenge of This Decade - Western Balkans Working Age Population Declined by More than 400,000 in Past 5 Years," [www.rcc.int](http://www.rcc.int), 2020, accessed April 25, 2021, <https://www.rcc.int/news/598/bregu-brain-drain-the-biggest-challenge-of-thisdecade-western-balkans-working-age-population-declined-by-more-than-400000-in-past-5-years>.

17 RFE/RL's Balkan Service, "Protesters Rally in Belgrade to Call for Action on Environment," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2021, accessed April 25, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-protest-environment-coal-balkans-pollution-belgrade/31197067.html>.

18 Vlatka Matkovic Puljic et al., "Chronic Coal Pollution: EU Action on the Western Balkans Will Improve Health and Economies across Europe," ed. Genon K. Jensen, 2019, accessed April 25, 2021, <https://beyond-coal.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/FINAL-Chronic-Coal-Pollution-report.pdf>.

19 European Fund for the Balkans, "What Is Polluted Air Doing to Us in the Western Balkans?," [www.balkanfund.org](http://www.balkanfund.org), 2021, accessed April 25, 2021, <https://www.balkanfund.org/general-news/what-is-polluted-air-doing-to-us-in-the-western-balkans>.

20 Ursula von der Leyen, "A Union That Strives for More: My Agenda for Europe," 2019, accessed April 25, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/political-guidelines-next-commission\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en_0.pdf).

21 Jessica Bateman, "The Young People Fighting the Worst Smog in Europe," [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com), accessed April 25, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200701-skopje-north-macedonia-the-most-polluted-city-in-europe>.

Emanuela Barbiroglio, "Europe's 100 Most Polluted Cities," [Forbes](http://Forbes.com), 2020, accessed April 25, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emanuelabarbiroglio/2020/02/29/cities-in-poland-and-italy-among-europes-100-most-polluted/?sh=6104e47c58fd>.

and pollution of water resources with heavy metals.

Another environmental risk looming in the Western Balkans are the small hydropower plant projects responsible for the destruction of pristine rivers, the devastation of natural habitat, and overall negative impact on the flora and fauna that depend on the river. The mushrooming of large numbers of small hydropower plants in remote villages as well as in urban areas has intruded on the lives of local communities across the Western Balkans region. This has provoked a wave of non-violent resistance and civic protests. In 2020, a total of 3.431 hydropower plants were planned, 108 are under construction and 1.480 are operational in the Balkans.<sup>22</sup>

The WB6 governments pay attention to environmental and climate-related matters, a topic within the competence of environment ministries exclusively. This indicates a misguided understanding of economic development as the relevant ministries are not completely aware of the EU's climate policies. Such a lack of knowledge often leads to neglecting the contribution and responsibility of all other sectors affecting the issue. The consequence of this is a lack of cooperation and communication between different sectoral ministries and the development of strategies, plans and programs without taking into account an intersectoral approach.

One of the pillars of the aforementioned policies should be the youth, especially when it comes to holding the decision-makers accountable, as outlined in some of the EU Member States' strategic documents.<sup>23</sup> Young people recognise the value of a clean environment, and they should be encouraged to contribute to the promotion of well-being within the region, guided by the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development. Moreover, grass-root movements in WB6 carry out a significant role in educating people and promoting the activities oriented towards taking care of the environment, which points towards a necessity of crafting comprehensive policies on the (inter-) governmental level. The choices concerning these issues will influence not only the region's environment in the coming decades but also that of other European countries. For this reason, a future-oriented perspective is important.

We have only one planet, and we cannot afford to neglect environmental hazards happening around us. We highly encourage the greater involvement of WB6 at the Conference on the Future of Europe as an important input for jointly developing strategies to tackle environmental issues and preserve our nature.

## Final Remarks and Recommendations

The EU's role has been well recognised for more than two decades in the Western Balkan region. It represents an international framework for fostering reforms in the WB6 through its financial, technical, legal, political and value-based mechanisms. However, on the one hand, the awareness of its role in the WB6 needs to be enhanced. On the other hand, the EU has not always accounted for the Western Balkans when developing new policies and setting new requirements.

The Western Balkan region is still a sensitive area, potentially dangerous for developing new instabilities on the margins of the inter-ethnic issues influenced by the unfavourable socio-economic situation. The environmental negligence and lack of awareness of the need to preserve our nature is creating an incentive for the young generation to leave the region.

WB6 governments need to include youth in their political agendas since youth represents the future of Europe. Youth should be recognised not only as beneficiaries, but as contributors to policy-making processes. Their perspectives should be taken into account in various governmental policies – not only the ones strictly related to youth.

Simultaneously, the EU should strive to incorporate a distinct approach by including more WB6 in the process as an equal partner, beginning with the Conference on the Future of Europe. This would be an advancement in the EU-WB6 relationship and an impetus for tackling pressing common issues.

22 Ulrich Schwarz, "Hydropower Projects on Balkan Rivers - 2020 Update," ed. Amelie Huber and Cornelia Wieser, (RiverWatch & EuroNatur, 2020), accessed April 25, 2021, [https://balkanrivers.net/uploads/files/3/Balkan\\_HPP\\_Update\\_2020.pdf](https://balkanrivers.net/uploads/files/3/Balkan_HPP_Update_2020.pdf).

23 Ministry of the Environment of the Czech Republic, "MoE Pledge to Defend the Youth's Interests. Minister Brabec Signed the UN Youth Climate Promise," <https://www.mzp.cz/>, July 14, 2020, accessed April 25, 2021, [https://www.mzp.cz/en/news\\_20200714\\_MoE\\_pledge\\_to\\_defend\\_the\\_Youths\\_interests\\_UN\\_youth\\_climate\\_promise](https://www.mzp.cz/en/news_20200714_MoE_pledge_to_defend_the_Youths_interests_UN_youth_climate_promise).

## Key recommendations directed both to the European Union and the Western Balkans:

### 1. To develop a comprehensive strategy and programme on the Western Balkans contribution towards the Conference on the Future of Europe

We encourage the WB6 to take the initiative in putting forward a viable and practical proposal for a Western Balkan's owned strategy for engagement into the Conference on the Future of Europe. The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) as a regional mechanism might support the coordination of a WB6 network of politicians appointed by the national governments to be a part of the Conference. The EU's new multilingual digital platform for CoFoE, involving European citizens, should be promoted to the WB6 in order to foster their engagement in the creation of the future of the EU as potential new members.

### 2. To include the Western Balkan youth in the EU-WB6 decision-making processes

Special consideration should be taken to ensure the inclusion of youth representatives in high-level meetings between the EU and WB6 institutions in areas not only related to youth issues.

### 3. To introduce an Erasmus-like scheme for the Western Balkans

Enforce mobility initiatives in the field of formal education in order to connect WB6 school pupils and university students with their peers throughout the region. A program such as Erasmus+ should be developed for the Western Balkans, where youth across the region could study and research, for example, from Novi Sad, Serbia to Elbasan, Albania; or from Bar, Montenegro to Tetovo, North Macedonia; or from Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina to Prizren, Kosovo. It would promote intercultural dialogue, boost brain circulation, and foster regional cooperation among high school pupils and university students.

### 4. To encourage the implementation of the Common Regional Market as a par excellence tool for providing better conditions for youth and building cohesion throughout our societies

It is of utmost importance to be fostered by the EU and WB6 as it will confirm the necessity of regional cooperation, deepening the integration of the region and the harmonisation with the rules of the Single Market of the EU. This could bring the WB6 immensely closer to the EU. Additionally, the EU's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans should be used to contribute to building cohesion and sustainable development of the WB6.

### 5. To connect the WB6 capitals with direct flight lines

Every Western Balkan capital city should be connected with five direct flight lines to other WB6 capitals. Additionally, other cities in the region should be connected through airline routes. Without proper transport and infrastructure connections, the Western Balkan region will not be able to foster cooperation, increase exchange and nurture reconciliation.

### 6. To move forward with visa liberalisation for Kosovo within the Slovenian EU Presidency

Citizens of Kosovo are the only ones in the Western Balkans who still need a visa to travel to the Schengen zone. Since July 2018, the European Commission has confirmed several times that Kosovo meets all the required benchmarks for visa liberalisation. The EU should preserve its credibility in the region by delivering on its promises given to Kosovo citizens and abolish the visa regime by the end of the Slovenian Presidency

### 7. To abolish the visa regime between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo

There is an existing visa regime between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo that inhibits socio-economic cooperation, individual relationships, and even youth mobility programs. It is necessary to be resolved as soon as possible at the bilateral level with the support of the EU.

### 8. To sustain and strengthen regional cooperation and mutual understanding

The EU role is not visible enough in mitigating the threat of foreign influence and fostering the reconciliation process in the WB6 region. For instance, Montenegro, a peaceful, cooperative and multicultural society, is the most recent evident proof of rising national radicalism and instabilities with malign foreign influence that can spill over throughout the region. The EU's role in Montenegro, as well as throughout the Western Balkans, needs to be strengthened by extending its model "United in diversity" within the region.

### 9. To refrain from engaging in redrawing borders along ethnic lines.

The EU and the WB6 should work together in preventing any border changes in the region, as those could trigger ethnic conflicts with potentially devastating consequences, as was the case in the 1990s. We call on the WB6 governments to make the Western Balkan borders invisible, as they are invisible in the Schengen area.

**10. To promote positive stories from the EU programs and funds throughout the Western Balkans**

The WB6 governments should enhance the visibility on success stories of young people who benefited from the EU through Erasmus+ projects, youth exchange schemes, training and similar programs. Young people who benefited from the EU programs and funds shall serve as an example for utilising their experience and lessons learned to the benefit of the Western Balkans. This process would foster development in the Western Balkans and raise awareness of the EU's role in the region.

**11. To introduce environment-related subjects into school curricula**

The schools across the Western Balkans should introduce more practice-oriented subjects related to environmental challenges, circular economy, and sustainable development. This would foster the raising of awareness and knowledge on environmental issues, responsible consumption, and a greener and more equitable society.

**12. To ban the construction of small hydropower plants**

The WB6 governments should introduce a moratorium on the construction of small hydropower plants in order to preserve natural habitat, save the pristine rivers, and support their traditional and sustainable use. Additionally, the regions' governments should immediately stop all public subsidies and feed-in tariffs to small hydropower plant investors and redirect investments in genuinely renewable energy sources such as solar and wind power.

**13. To establish new protected areas**

The WB6 governments should work towards expanding existing and establishing new natural protected areas, highlighting them as the "no-go" zones for investments that would cause a negative environmental impact. Expanding the network of protected areas would serve as a tool to preserve and protect natural species and sensitive habitats throughout the region.

**14. To endorse the European Green Deal and mainstream it throughout the sectoral policies in the region**

The European Climate Pact should gather the WB6 regions, local communities, civil society, industries, and schools in order to design and commit to a spectrum of principles that will bring about a positive behaviour change. Moreover, the Farm to Fork Strategy should be introduced to recognise the potential of the farmers in the region. Thus, the Strategy could be incorporated within the WB6 agricultural frameworks to establish and support the sustainable food programme, along with the maintenance of and investment into the rural areas.