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The Western Balkan focus
of Land Steiermark

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Government of Land Steiermark has set a focus on the Western Balkans in its current programme “Agenda Weiss-Grün”, which also goes in line with the foreign policies of both the Federal Government of Austria and the European Commission. The Styrian initiative aims at increasing the interregional cooperation with those six states – Albania,

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia and Serbia – that are not member states of the European Union yet. Based on a partnership of equals, Land Steiermark shall accompany its regional counterparts in the Western Balkans on their way to European Integration.



Land Steiermark pursues an active foreign and neighbourhood policy. In accordance with the Western Balkan Strategy of the European Union and the Austrian foreign policy, a politically backed focus on the Western Balkans shall be initiated. Styria establishes a sustainable network of Western Balkan regions in order to support their European integration.



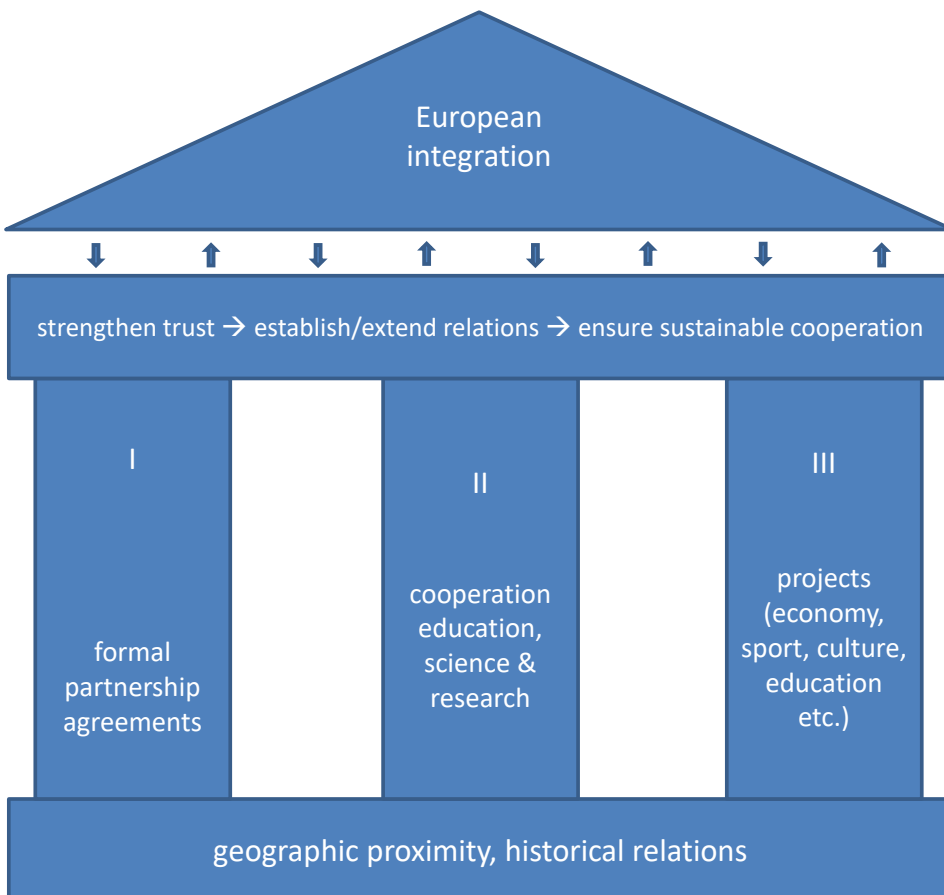
*(from “Agenda Weiss-Grün” –
Programme of the Government of Land Steiermark)*

2. WHY A STYRIAN FOCUS ON THE WESTERN BALKANS?

Due to its geographic proximity – from the border crossing at Spielfeld to the Croatian-Bosnian border it is just a two-hour-drive – the (Western) Balkans have ever since been a close partner for Styria. The relations between Styria and the Western Balkans, however, are considerably more extensive and diverse.

Starting with a lively partnership amongst neighbours including cross-border family ties for centuries, the relationships have widened in different areas to the present day: culturally, with thirty years of biennial

“trigon” exhibitions; politically within the Alps-Adriatic network whose cooperation has essentially contributed to the EU accession of Slovenia and Croatia; socially, with the humanitarian aid during the Yugoslavian war and, in its aftermath, the support of educational institutions in the successor states; scientifically, by the intense research activity on language and culture, history and also latest developments. All these aspects not only highlight the historically close relations, but also emphasise Styria’s genuine interest in the region, which builds the basis for an even closer cooperation in the future.



3. WAYS TO A FUTURE COOPERATION

Based on the historically solid foundations of cooperation, Land Steiermark will gear its future activities towards bringing the two regions, i.e. Styria and the Western Balkans, closer together. These activities, which can be divided into three pillars, aim at strengthening mutual trust as well as establishing and extending bilateral and multilateral relations in order to ensure a sustainable cooperation within a permanently growing network between Styria and Western Balkan partners.

Metaphorically, Land Steiermark plans to build a common ‘house of cooperation’ with the Western Balkans: Close historical relations build the firm basis for future activities, which constitute the house’s main pillars. The pillars themselves support the mid-term goal of sustainable cooperation, which as a kind of crossbeam rests upon them. Above lies, as it were a roof, the all encompassing strategic goal of European Integration of the Western Balkans.





4. STRUCTURE OF THE WESTERN BALKAN FOCUS – THE THREE-PILLAR MODEL

Structurally, the activities within the Styrian Western Balkan focus are divided into three pillars, which shall support the future cooperation. The definition of each pillar is based on extensive analysis of the Department for European and International Affairs of Land Steiermark as well as intensive professional exchange with diplomatic missions in Austria and the Western Balkan states, respectively, with the Federal Ministry of European and International affairs, further experts on the Western Balkans and Styrian representatives of the (tertiary) educational sector, the economy and the cultural sector.

4.1 PILLAR ONE – FORMAL PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS

Political conclusions of new memoranda and, respectively, renewals of existing agreements (e.g. Vojvodina), which could cover a wide range of topics, constitute the formal basis of cooperation between Styria and individual Western Balkan regions. Styrian politics, i.e. the Government of Land

Steiermark and/or Styrian Parliament (Landtag Steiermark), will approach either local/regional authorities or other appropriate counterparts in the Western Balkans in order to sign such agreements. With regard to the initiation of new relations aiming at the conclusion of formal memorandums or partnership agreements, also the role of diplomatic missions in Austria and the Western Balkan states is of significance. As soon as the travel restrictions due to COVID-19 are eased, the formal act of signing agreements is intended to take place in the course of delegation visits. Until then, the establishment of contact and preparation of partnership agreements will be arranged at a virtual level.

4.2 PILLAR TWO – COOPERATION ON THE SECTOR OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND RESEARCH

The focus on the sector of education, science and research constitutes a key factor for the successful development of Styria as well as the Western Balkan countries and

consequently holds various possibilities of cooperation. The concentration on the area of education and science particularly involves adolescents as essential target group for establishing and strengthening relations within the Western Balkan focus. In this respect, Styrian universities, universities of applied sciences and teacher training colleges have gathered considerable experience by engaging in numerous bilateral cooperations or participating in EU-funded programmes such as ERASMUS+, CEEPUS and rectors' conferences – with their international contacts, their know-how and project management expertise, they can largely contribute to the extension of existing relations. In addition to the universities, the sector of elementary education plays a major role, since an early encounter of Styrian children and youths with the Western Balkans in the course of their school career is likely to result in a closer and more sustainable cross-border relationship.

A dialogue on a regular basis between the Styrian (tertiary) educational sector and Land Steiermark shall, on the one hand, ensure a continuous flow of information, e.g. on relevant events. On the other hand, that permanent professional exchange aims to promote the domestic network, which subsequently supports the harmonised joint appearance of Styria as a region before its (potential) Western Balkan partners in the sector of education and science. Furthermore, the internal networking shall serve to establish a pool of experts who provide their expertise for events and partner organisations within the Styrian network of education institutions.

In this context, Land Steiermark launches a discussion series on issues related to the Western Balkans by early 2021, which is inspired by the tried and tested format “Café Europa” and prospectively will be organised four times a year. The new series does not only provide a platform for representatives from the Western Balkans (e.g. diplomatic missions) as well as Styrian politics, economy and society, but also regularly invites experts from the Styrian education network to contribute to the

discussion. Apart from a regular exchange of information and ideas, it is the purpose of the discussion format to collect topics and prepare the ground for a Styrian Western Balkan conference (see below).

4.3 PILLAR THREE – IMPLEMENTATION OF PROJECTS

In addition to pillars one and two, which create the formal conditions for a cooperation between Styria and individual partners from the Western Balkans and aim at establishing both a domestic and cross-border network in the field of (tertiary) education, the third pillar provides the framework for concrete projects. This project framework comprises all the topics that may be relevant to Styria and the regions of the Western Balkans, ranging e.g. from health, climate and environmental protection to agriculture, economy, education and science or digitalisation.

In its role as a ‘door-opener’ and intermediary, Land Steiermark can establish contact between Styrian public institutions, enterprises or NGOs and respective regions in the Western Balkans and, additionally, provide its know-how on European funding opportunities. Moreover, Land Steiermark offers its own services as a partner for concrete projects. Any projects with Western Balkan regions that are directly initiated by Land Steiermark shall be continuously documented and, if necessary and possible, technically supported.

Due to their importance, each of those three pillars of action can stand on their own. It is, however, only in the interaction among themselves that they develop their true significance for the deepening of the Styrian relations with the Western Balkans. At the same time, the pillars are united in the aim of ensuring a sustainable cooperation on a broad basis with regard to the selection of regional partners and topics. The organisation of a Styrian Western Balkan conference is intended to be a milestone on the way to such a comprehensive and long-term cooperation.



5. STYRIAN WESTERN BALKAN CONFERENCE

A conference on the cooperation with Western Balkan regions in Styria at the end of the current legislative period provides a platform for an overview over all the projects that will have been implemented by then. Moreover, it gives room for discussion on the status quo of the relations between Styria and its Western Balkan partners and their future development. The professional exchange will be organised in different formats, e.g. talks and panel discussions, and will include experts from the research and education pool (pillar two), project partners (pillar three) as well as political representatives (pillar one). Hence, the conference marks the point of provisional

assessment of the Styrian focus on the Western Balkans and, simultaneously, is to define the starting point for a long-term cooperation that from then on – similar to the Styrian-Slovenian Joint Committee – will have a formally established character.

The implementation of interregional activities within the three-pillar model and the Styrian Western Balkan conference certainly takes into consideration European programmes and funding opportunities as well as the strategic goal of accompanying the Western Balkan countries on their way to European Integration.

6. PRIORITIES IN THE INTERREGIONAL COOPERATION

With respect to the formal agreements on cooperation and partnership, Land Steiermark prioritises – in line with the standards defined in its Strategy on European and International affairs – those Western Balkan regions that allow for mutually fruitful cooperation and a concrete benefit for Styria.

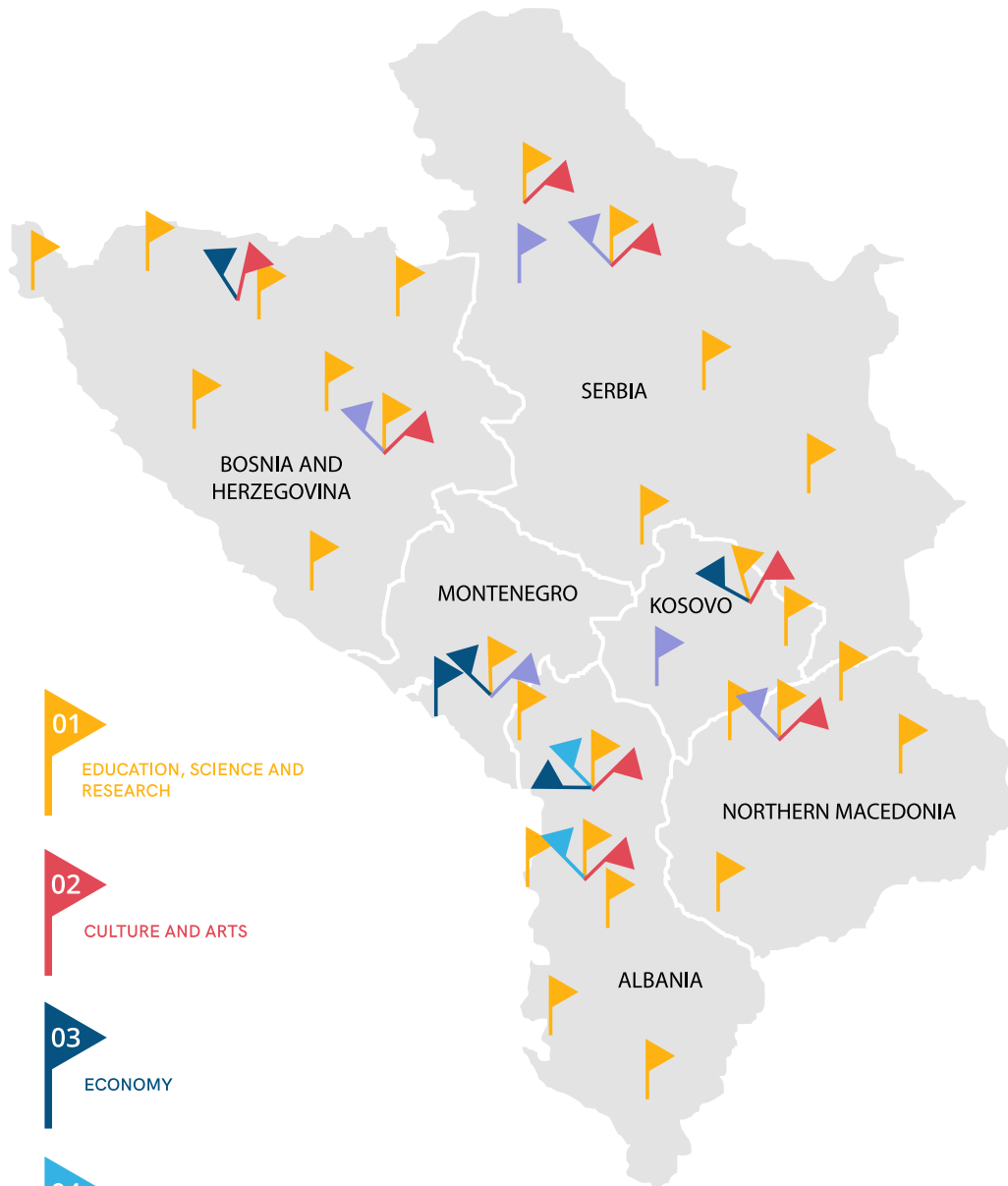
Thus, existing cooperations and planned regional priorities of Styrian partners from thematic areas such as education, science and research, economy and tourism, social

affairs, culture and arts or sport, in the Western Balkans constitute an important criterion for the search of regions apt for formal partnership agreements.

The map below marks, colour-coded according to thematic areas, those agglomerations and regions, respectively, where Styrian institutions, organisations and enterprises are engaged already and/or recognise the potential for closer cooperation.

REGIONAL PRIORITIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS





PRIORITIES
OF STYRIAN PARTNERS IN THE
WESTERN BALKANS

 **Northern Macedonia**
Skopje, Stip,
Tetovo, Ohrid,
Kumanovo

 **Serbia**
Belgrade, Niš,
Raška, Sumadija,
AP Vojvodina,
Mačva

