

## WESTERN BALKANS Program Memo Summary

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### INTRODUCTION

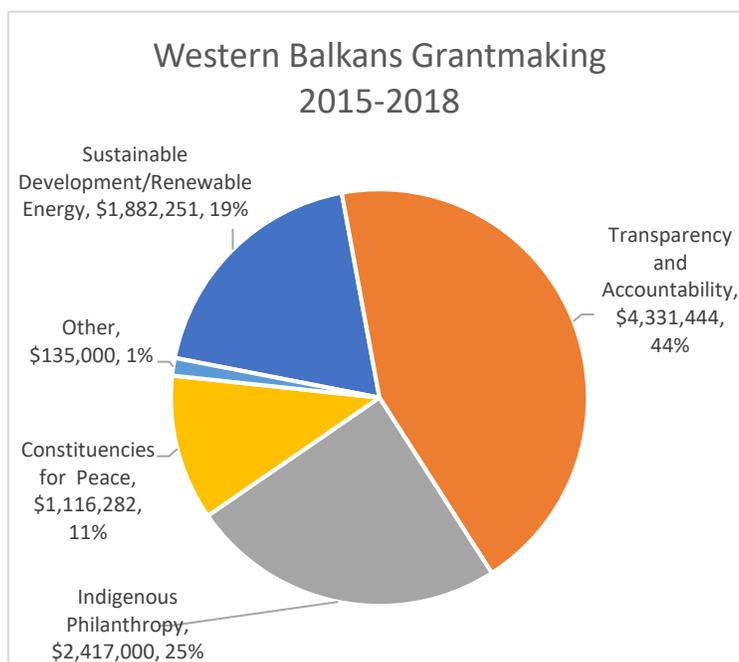
The purpose of this memo is to provide an opportunity for the new Western Balkans program staff to reflect on the Fund's Western Balkans grantmaking over the past four years and consider changes and trends in the rapidly changing context for the region and their implications for the Fund's work.

Since the program's inception in 2001, the Fund's vision for the Western Balkans has centered on European integration. This was re-emphasized following the program review in 2015, which established the program goal of **supporting the successful integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union**. The Fund initially focused on Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo. In 2016, Bosnia and Herzegovina was added to the portfolio; the Fund has connected with Albania and Macedonia through select regional initiatives. The program review, [published in 2016](#), also identified four grantmaking strategies:

1. Supporting civil society efforts to improve practices, performance, transparency, and accountability in governance.
2. Advancing sustainable development, focusing on an efficient regional energy sector based on renewable energy resources.
3. Strengthening constituencies for reconciliation and enduring peace.
4. Encouraging the development of indigenous philanthropy and corporate social responsibility to support participatory democracy and models of sustainable development.

Over the four-year period 2015–2018, the program supported a total of 112 grants and appropriations totaling \$9.9 million. This funding was allocated to 67 organizations and individual consultants. Nearly 90 percent of grantmaking dollars went to organizations and consultants based in the Western Balkans; the balance supports organizations in Brussels and Washington, D.C., working on issues relevant for the Western Balkans.

Grantmaking was allocated across program strategies as illustrated in the chart to the right.



## WESTERN BALKANS CONTEXT

When the program guidelines were developed, the prospect of European Union (EU) integration brought a strong level of optimism to the Western Balkans. It was expected to be the main process driving the consolidation of democracy, providing the template for functioning states governed by the rule of law, bringing about durable peace, and developing the economies in the Western Balkans.

That optimism has since been challenged by the slowness of reforms in the region, economic crisis, the global influx of refugees, and the delays in the accession process. Now, in early 2019, the EU itself is struggling, and the integration of Western Balkans seems more distant than it did 10 years ago.

Thirty or so years since the end of communism and 20-some since the Balkan wars ended, the Western Balkans region is still in a state of transition. The feeling in the region is that even though there is no open conflict, there is no real peace, either. The region is at an inflection point where it can either accelerate progress towards democracy, peace, and EU membership, or it could slide towards conflict. The transformation of Western Balkans societies to true and functioning democracies—with flourishing public spaces and informed, engaged, and empowered citizens—remains a compelling vision for the people of the region.

Some progress has been made—the transition to a market economy is mostly complete and, although flawed, the change is likely irreversible. Civil society and independent media in each of the countries are developing slowly, creating stronger connections with their constituencies and growing their capacities to mobilize and influence. But the full realization of fundamental democratic promises, including freedom, equality, the rule of law, and free and equal participation in political processes, will take more time.

The assumption of a normative transition and the expectation of linear progress from authoritarianism to liberal democracy, as was thought to have been successfully completed in central Europe, was applied to the Balkans. However, the path of “democracy through integration,” within which the EU would export democratic standards through its enlargement policy, has not fully delivered yet. As the Balkan states moved closer to the EU—negotiating accession, opening and closing chapters, receiving reports and recommendations—it became apparent that this process was not bringing real progress toward the creation of democratic institutions, practices, or norms. Although each country has made some progress, most reforms have not translated to a higher quality of life for the people.

Polls show that a majority of people still see joining the EU as the best road to prosperity, but the promise of European integration is losing its talismanic power. The EU itself recognizes this and is prioritizing reconciliation, connectedness, and good neighborly relations in its enlargement strategy.

*“True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.”*  
- Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*, 1958

*“It takes six months to build a market economy, six years to build a parliamentary democracy, and 60 years to build civil society.”*  
- Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*

## MOVING FORWARD

Given the above, the Fund's work in the Western Balkans remains relevant. Our history of engagement in the region, strong partnerships with civil society, focus on democracy and peace, and experience working in countries in transition position the Fund to make meaningful contributions in the region. The RBF is one of the only two private U.S. donors still funding in the Balkans.

A vision of the Western Balkans as a just, sustainable, and peaceful region within Europe remains the guiding force for the program. Although EU integration remains an important priority, the program's goals and strategies will need to be flexible and responsive to allow for democratic transformation and durable peace to happen with or without EU integration. To this end, staff will implement the following approaches:

**Prioritize democratic reforms and peacebuilding** as the most urgent responses to the current situation in the Western Balkans. This will mean maintaining the levels of funding for democratic practice with focus on transparency and accountability in governance and gradually increasing the peacebuilding portfolio to include more transitional justice and people-to-people work in addition to the current regional and national policy initiatives.

**Sharpen focus of sustainable development engagements and indigenous philanthropy development.** The sustainable development work will focus on regional initiatives in collaboration with the Fund's Sustainable Development and Democratic Practice–Global Challenges programs. In addition to supporting efforts to turn toward renewable energy, staff will explore supporting a network of sustainable cities in the Balkans and connecting them with European and global networks. Grantmaking for indigenous philanthropy will decrease relative to the total portfolio and focus on strategic opportunities to help local and national foundations and civil society to empower people to act, take responsibility, and drive social transformation.

**Increase investment in bottom-up approaches** while continuing support for top-down EU accession-related reforms and processes. At a time when the EU accession process is losing its motivational appeal as well as its force as a pressure tool, the prospects for democratic transformation will benefit from grassroots engagement of citizens.

**Support partnerships among civil society organizations and across issues, sectors, borders, communities, and ethnic and religious groups** (for example, between anti-corruption and women's initiatives, peace and renewable energy efforts, etc.) to create synergies and build movements for change. This includes developing capacities, leadership, knowledge, connections, and mobilization opportunities to leverage strength and maximize impact. In addition, the RBF will partner with other donors to scale up existing and jointly design/implement new initiatives.

**Encourage regional initiatives** that address common challenges while building bridges, understanding, and support for the "other." The countries of the Western Balkans share many of the same issues: corruption, lack of accountability, environmental issues, energy. Initiatives and organizations that make the link across countries will address issues in more strategic ways, strengthen the efforts of grantees, and influence how people look at their neighbors to see more connections than they currently recognize.

**Create conditions and spaces** (physical, virtual, discursive, mental) for leaders, activists, and communities to generate knowledge, innovate, and find answers to challenges. One of the things we hear over and over again is that activists need space—to think, to reflect, to connect, to innovate, to mobilize, and to feel safe. The Civil Society Houses in each country, initiated with RBF support over the last decade, may offer one possibility to address this challenge.

**Incorporate gender analysis and perspective** in all work. There is evidence that understanding gender power relations and inequalities can improve the design of governance and anti-corruption interventions, peacebuilding, and other activities. To ensure that all people are equally benefitting from programs and that programs have no unintended consequences that disproportionately affect any gender, the Fund will work with its grantees to apply a gender lens to planned actions, including legislation, policies, or programs.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Western Balkans program adopted following revised language for the program guidelines. The revised text better reflects the context in which we work today, de-emphasizes the formal EU accession process, and updates the articulation of the Fund's priorities with minor changes to the program strategies.

### **Western Balkans Program Guidelines**

*Revised March 2019*

The Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF) has been engaged in grantmaking in the Western Balkans since 2001, following 20 years of experience supporting transition processes and EU accession in Central and Eastern Europe. The Fund's work has been predicated on the belief that long-term peace and prosperity in Europe can only be achieved with successful post-communist and post-conflict transitions of the countries of the Balkans. RBF grantmaking in the Western Balkans has aimed to nurture healthy democratic processes, support regional initiatives to debunk persistent myths and prejudices, and encourage development of indigenous philanthropy and a vibrant civil society.

The countries of the Western Balkans are still in a process of transformation to truly democratic societies where institutions of governance are transparent, accountable, and responsive, and citizens are informed and assertive. Although some reforms have been achieved many challenges remain. Some of the obstacles reflect the legacy of conflict and unresolved tensions among countries and communities, and these must be addressed to realize justice, equality, and peace for all people in the region.

The Fund supports efforts of civil society groups, governmental institutions, and other partners to strengthen democratic practice, advance reconciliation and durable peace, enable sustainable development, and promote a European future for the region. The Fund values and highlights the richness of the region's ethnic, gender, age, cultural, and racial diversity and promotes pluralistic and inclusive societies. Efforts at the regional, national, and local levels, including grassroots engagement and movement building, are supported.

The Fund focuses on Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with Albania and North Macedonia also included in regional initiatives. The interdependence among the countries, the

common challenges they face, and the potential they share as a subregion within Europe present a unique opportunity for successful transformation, integration, and long-term stability.

The RBF is pursuing the following goal and strategies across the Western Balkans region:

**Goal: Advance a peaceful, democratic, and European Western Balkans**

**Strategies:**

1. Supporting efforts to improve transparency and accountability in governance.
2. Strengthening constituencies for reconciliation and enduring peace.
3. Advancing sustainable development, focusing on renewable energy and healthy environments.
4. Supporting the development of indigenous philanthropy to advance social transformation.

*The Fund prioritizes support for organizations in the Western Balkans.*