DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

BALKAN RURAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK
2023 -2027

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Foreword

BRDN is a regional network of NGO-based rural development networks in the Western Balkan (WB), bringing together the rural development networks from North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania.

The reason for starting the Balkan Rural Development Network (BRDN) was the common interest of the rural development networks in the Western Balkans to establish a platform, through which they could regularly exchange information, experience and knowledge, network and cooperate together in order to increase their effectiveness in the work with their constituents on national level, but also to enhance their influence in the rural development at regional and EU level. Therefore, the individual-driven interest of the member-organisations, to strengthen their own position on national level, by networking and cooperating with each other, has evolved into a common mission for advocacy and networking, aiming to improve the livelihood and promote the diversity and potential of the rural communities from the Balkan region.

The Rural Development Networks (RDNs), members of BRDN, consist in each country of membership-based non-government organizations at national or regional level, which are actively contributing to the rural development processes. The BRDN through its members currently represents 265 rural development associations from the region, and advocates for the interests of more than 9 million rural people from the represented countries.

The **fundamental goals** behind the establishment of BRDN are the following:

- enabling fair economic opportunities for prosperity and sustainability of rural areas in the Balkan region,
- supporting, improving and strengthening the national rural networks in the Balkan region, by providing inclusivity of programs and activities on rural development,
- enhancing organizational development, exchange of experience, use of know-how and best practices, advocacy and lobbying, promotion and communication,
- providing equal opportunities for members, including networking, participation and integration, using experience from their diversity, transparency, promoting professionalism, continuous learning, orientation towards better results and equal gender participation in rural development.

1. Progress on the EU Integration process of the Western Balkans

The Balkan Rural Development Network is established by the national rural development networks of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. The 6 countries of the Western Balkans – namely the five official candidates (Montenegro, Macedonia, Albania, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the potential candidate, Kosovo – after Croatia's adhesion in 2013, are on the track of a gradual integration in the EU.

The accession negotiations with EU, are in progress for Serbia and Montenegro, while North Macedonia and Albania opened the accession talks with the European Union in 2022. The negotiations are set to be drawn out, as 35 different chapters ranging from environmental rights to measures against corruption will need to be agreed upon. The official process was started by a presentation on the negotiation framework and will be followed by the EU head office screening how well both of the Western Balkan countries are prepared to take on laws, rules and regulations of the union.

To bring the six Western Balkan states closer to the EU, the Berlin Process was initiated in 2014 under Chancellor Angela Merkel. The Berlin Process annual summits and the numerous meetings held related to them intensified the interaction between the EU and the WB high-level politicians and succeeded in making important challenges of the Western Balkan states regarding regional cooperation a subject of discussion, as well as subsequently keeping the WB6 on the agenda of the EU-states and institutions. The Berlin Process has stimulated regional cooperation in resolving the problems of common relevance. Amongst the thematic areas are the infrastructure gap, youth unemployment, low competitiveness of economies and distant prospects of economic convergence with the EU, slow progress in reconciliation, bilateral issues, education and research, Roma integration, and environmental issues.

The civil society uniting rural network organizations in WB within the framework of the Balkan Rural Development Network is emerging as a strong factor that can influence rural development policies and bring them closer to the EU. The Balkan Rural Parliament is a forum to which we urge national Governments in the Western Balkans and the European Union to provide effective support, so as to strengthen capacities of the Civil Society Organizations and Networks, and enable the voice of rural people to respond to their hopes and concerns.

In this matter, BRDN will

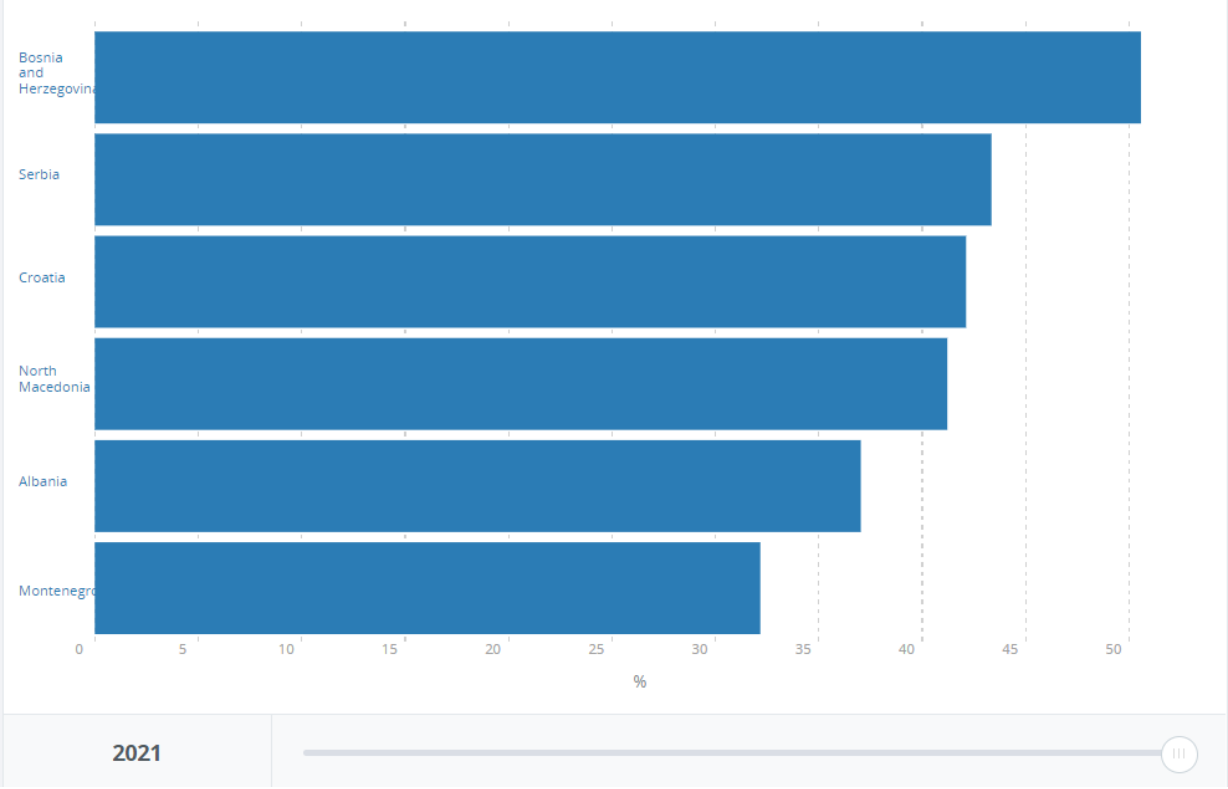
- ✓ contribute to the EU integration process by mobilizing its resources and channels of influence through advocacy and lobbying at national and European level to accelerate the EU integration process by addressing the needs and situation in rural areas of the Western Balkans.
- ✓ increase the communication with the European Union and facilitate the advocacy of the member networks based on the achievements and interests of numerous rural stakeholders and initiatives in the Western Balkans.

- ✓ promote a common advocacy approach related to the rural development policies and programs of the WB contributing to the EU integration. Such an approach will be effective only if the WB policy and decision makers consider the rural voice as part of the integration process.

2. Rural Development – a Country Situation Analysis

Rural development and agriculture (as major part of rural development) are important priorities in the accession process for all BRDN member countries, regardless of the progress stage in approximation to the European Union. This also applies for Croatia, which as a member country is a step-ahead, being able to utilize the support measures designed with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

Even though the average of the rural population in the target region of BRDN is around 41%, still the official country records show that unemployment among rural population is higher than the country average, which is due to the limited opportunities for entrepreneurial and business development. This is affected by the limited access to funding resources (banks and other financial institutions are more reluctant to give loans in rural areas), the underdevelopment of the infrastructure and access to the rural areas, as well as the weak access to public institutions.



Rural population (% of total)[1]

[1] Source: http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?locations=AL-BA-HR-XK-MK-ME-RS&view=chart

Another common characteristic of the rural population in the BRDN countries is that the level of education is primary or secondary (less people are university graduates), which in combination with the above hindrances leaves agriculture as major occupational choice and limits the employability potential and possibilities for the rural population. Being employed in agriculture, with limited awareness of diversification, and entrepreneurial knowhow, the poverty rate among rural population is above the country average in all of the BRDN countries.

The research study on Agribusiness and Agro-Industrial Strategies, Policies and Priorities for Achieving Higher Competitiveness, Employability and Sustainability in the Western Balkans Region[2] summarizes the following common issues that affect rural development in the Western Balkan countries:

- Low competitiveness of economic activities in rural areas (agriculture, forestry, fishery, food sector, rural tourism, service industry);
- Underdeveloped basic municipal and basic infrastructure in rural areas;
- Underdeveloped access of rural population and economic subjects placed in rural areas to public institutions and goods (telecommunications, public transport, educational and information systems, health - care);
- Depopulation of rural areas;
- Unfavourable age and gender structure of rural population (18,9% of population in rural areas is older than 60 – women, and 65 years – men);
- Low level of education of rural population;
- Weak activity or non – existence of regional and local institutions competent for rural development; and
- Inadequate coordination of programs and activities directed towards different economic activities in rural areas.

According to the IMF Working Paper, "Western Balkans: Increasing Women's Role in the Economy" (2017), the Western Balkan countries have some of the lowest female labor force participation and employment rates across Europe. Almost two-thirds of working age women in the region are either inactive or unemployed: a huge bite into human capital for a region that endures high emigration and faces declining working age population. The findings show that improving educational attainment, having a more balanced family leave policy, and reducing tax wedge help improve participation of women in the labor force. However, these measures are not

[2] Grozdanić, R. (2013). Executive Summary. In R. Grozdanić, *Agribusiness and Agro-Industrial Strategies, Policies and Priorities for Achieving Higher Competitiveness, Employability and Sustainability in the Western Balkans Region* (p. 24). Belgrade: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

enough to notably improve employability of women, which require stronger growth supported by robust institutions.

Representation of women in decision making processes in rural areas is not on a satisfactory level. The dominant stereotypical opinion of gender roles in the society prevents women's involvement in decision making processes in rural areas. Women face difficulties in accessing information important to economic opportunity, such as on legal rights (employment, inheritance, etc), value chain opportunities, and local infrastructure planning & delivery because their behavior patterns/ information preferences are not taken into account. Lack of kindergartens and other infrastructure and social services in rural areas prevent the full development of women's potential and contribution to sustainable rural development making women more vulnerable, economically dependent and susceptible to gender discrimination. Unavailability of shelter centers to protect women from gender based violence in rural areas limits their ability to pursuit justice, achieve independence and obtain gender equality. In many of the Western Balkan countries there is a small percentage of women land owners. As result of the dominant tradition in all the communities, men are inheriting the property. Interactions between legal and social norms impact on women's abilities to exercise their autonomy and make important decisions about their lives for themselves; pursue economic and other opportunities; and, have their voices heard in all spheres, including in the family, community and society. This directly underpins many of the inequalities identified above

Another common characteristic is the more frequent migration from rural to urban areas among young people, which consequently leads to unfavourable age structure (with the exception of Kosovo), among the rural population in the BRDN countries.

With the Ukrainian war crisis and the previous Covid-19 pandemic, the living conditions in the rural areas are even more difficult. Rural areas are much less prepared to deal with the direct and indirect impacts, such as the economic and energy crises, as well as the increased migration. This outmigration results in reduced labour force in food production and with the increase of prices of energy and agricultural inputs, there is increased risk of securing food production, as well as lack of food availability and food affordability. Rural inhabitants have less access to adequate sanitation, health services, education, internet and communications technology, social protection and public infrastructure. Many rural families are facing existential problems, small businesses are having difficulty operating, and people already living on the margins are becoming increasingly impoverished.

The Western Balkans is one of the regions in Europe most heavily affected by the impact of climate change and this trend is projected to continue, with estimates of temperature increases

of 1.7 – 4.0°C, and even exceeding 5.0°C by the end of the century[3], depending on the global effort in greenhouse gasses emission reduction. Such trend will have adverse impact on agriculture, forestry and water supply. This along with other environmental issues such as pollution (air, water and soil), deforestation, waste and usage of conventional energy sources (ex: oil, coal) increase the carbon footprint and endanger the rural livelihoods.
To secure transition to climate-neutrality in a just and inclusive manner, the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans [4]was adopted, which is in line with the European Green Deal.

All these are factors that limit the "attractiveness" of life in rural areas. In addition, in the Western Balkan countries, there is a lack of active networking and concepts of sustainable socio-economic development of rural areas, social inclusion of rural communities, and active involvement of civil society in shaping and implementing policies for RD. Hence, the Balkan Rural Development Network members recognize the need to network, cooperate and advocate together to change the overall environment and development climate for the rural areas, and consequently the rural population of the Balkans. Thus, the BRDN members need to undertake activities that reflect the BRDN development goals, and therefore strengthen the positioning of the network in the region, while encouraging grassroots involvement in public decision-making and reform processes, and networking and advocacy to introduce favourable rural development policies, by offering evidence-based policy solutions.

3. Organisation profile

3.1. BRDN History

The Balkan Rural Development Network (BRDN) was established as an informal platform on March 04, 2011 in Skopje, by the Rural Development Network of the Republic of Serbia, Rural Development Network of the Republic of Macedonia and Rural Development Network of the Republic of Montenegro, based on the *Declaration of Networking* signed at the Regional Participatory Planning Workshop on "Establishment of rural development networks in SEE countries". The need for establishing the organisation was recognised by the constituent organisations, and was supported by the Regional Rural Development Standing Working Group (SWG) in South Eastern Europe. Later, the following 4 rural development networks from the Western Balkans, joined BRDN: Albanian Network for Rural Development – ANRD; Rural development network in Bosnia and Herzegovina – MRRBiH; Croatian network for rural development – HMRR; and Network of organizations for rural development of Kosovo – NORDK.

[3] https://www.rcc.int/news/383/rcc-publishes-study-on-climate-change-in-the-western-balkans-alarming-increase-of-temperature-over-the-whole-territory
[4] https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-10/green_agenda_for_the_western_balkans_en.pdf

In 2020, BRDN was officially registered as a union of civil society organizations, with its seat in Skopje, North Macedonia, when the Statute of BRDN was developed and adopted by all 7 full-fledged members, the rural development networks of the Western Balkans and Croatia.

The member organisations are all established in the WB region, and are themselves member organisations, which represent national rural communities' interests and rights, and act for rural development. The BRDN member-networks currently represent 265 rural development associations from the region, and advocate for the interests of more than 9 million rural people from the represented countries. The characteristics and assets each of the BRDN members bring-into the network are summarised as follows:

The *guiding principles* of BRDN that unite the member-organisations in common mission for integrative rural development in the Balkans region, are:

- Enhancement of dialogue, confidence and cooperation among the members;
- Sustainable development based on preserving and development of the natural resources and living environment;
- Support diversity of the rural areas;
- Bottom-up approach and empowerment of the local rural communities;
- Networking, cooperation, exchange of best practices, experience and knowhow;
- Advocacy, wide stakeholder involvement and cooperation with the academic community;
- Joint implementation of projects;
- Visibility, transparency and work accountability.

The fundamental *goals* behind the establishment of this Network, as stated in the BRDN Statute, are the following:

- enabling fair economic opportunities for prosperity and sustainability of rural areas in the Balkan region,
- supporting, improving and strengthening the national rural networks in the Balkan region, by providing inclusivity of programmes and activities on rural development,
- enhancing organisational development, exchange of experience, use of know-how and best practices, advocacy and lobbying, promotion and communication,
- providing equal opportunities for members, including networking, participation and integration, using experience from their diversity, transparency, promoting professionalism, continuous learning, orientation towards better results and equal gender participation in rural development.

By following the guiding work principles, and working towards fulfilment of the organisation's goals, BRDN will support effective utilisation of the natural and human capital and will contribute to sustainable growth and development of the rural areas. By doing so, it will back-up the empowerment of the rural communities, their participation in the policy and decision-making

processes, that will in the long run improve the social well-being of the rural people from the Western Balkan region.

3.2. Organisational structure

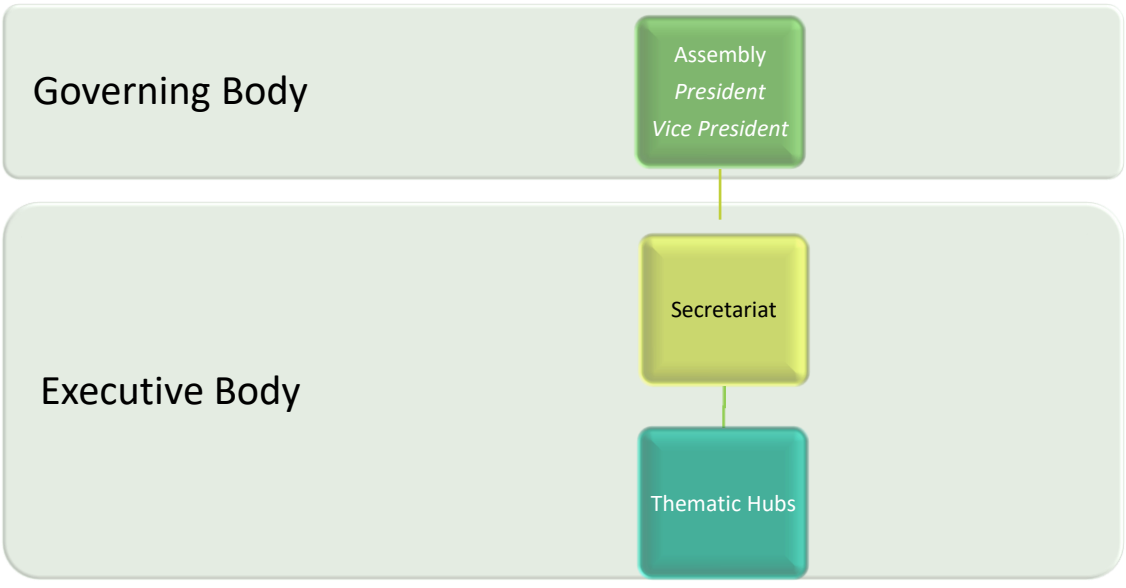
The **Assembly** is the highest body of BRDN consisted of representatives of the full-fledged members, the RDNs of: North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Croatia, Serbia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The **Assembly President** (currently the President of RDN of NM) is at the same time President of BRDN and represents and stands for the Network. In case of absence of the President, the **Vice President** (currently the BRDN Assembly member of the Croatian Rural Development Network) represents the BRDN.

BRDN work is performed by the **Secretariat** with its seat in Skopje, N. Macedonia, which is responsible for the professional and administrative work, that is to say it manages every-day activities, provides support to the Assembly and BRDN's Thematic Hubs.

The **Thematic Hubs** are initiated by the BRDN Assembly members and are organized and managed by the BRDN Secretariat. The participants in the Thematic Hubs are nominated by the members of the BRDN Assembly and the BRDN Secretariat. Through these structures, BRDN contributes to the inclusion of all stakeholders to initiate and stimulate the exchange of opinions and knowledge on a given topic through a networking process.

The **Gender Equality Hub** is a thematic hub which works on gender mainstreaming as a cross-cutting topic that applies on all priority areas of work of BRDN. The members of the Gender Equality Hub are delegated by the BRDN member networks and they act as gender focal points of the networks.

- Organigram of the organisation:



4. The BRDN Strategy 2023-2027 as an add-on to the former strategy content

Since the design of the last strategy in 2017, the development context in Europe has shifted. The presence is shaped by a new development paradigm through the announcement of the EU Green Deal in December 2020 and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkan (GAWB) Action Plan in October 2021. These two strategies and the expected related support programs have influenced and will further influence the future perspective and development priorities in the rural areas of the Western Balkan. The BRDN becomes in this respect a core representative body for the Western Balkan region to define jointly with its members the role and requirements for the promotion of rural areas within the future development agenda in Europe.

In this respect, the BRDN Strategy for the years 2023 to 2027 is considering these changing framework conditions and can also be interpreted as a position paper that defines the actions and priorities BRDN wants to promote in the upcoming years.

This new strategy‘s main objective is to increase the capacity of BRDN and their members to be an active player in promoting sustainable rural development in the Balkan region. To reach this end, the strategy has been designed in a participatory process with the Assembly members of BRDN and the BRDN Secretariat. During a planning workshop in November 2022 in Novi Sad, main activities were planned for the years 2023 and 2024. Additional milestones and activities were defined with the BRDN Secretariat and based on feedback and comments from its members in December 2022. Thus, this strategy can be defined as a “work in progress” document that BRDN will regularly adjust and reconsider jointly with their members during annual assemblies.

5. Stakeholder analysis

The stakeholders’ analysis of the Balkan Rural Development Network (BRDN) was prepared within the former strategy 2018-2022, so to anticipate the **interest** a specific stakeholder has in the organization and its success, while considering the **power** (influence) level the stakeholder could have over the success and work of the organization.

The stakeholders, as categorized by the BRDN members according to the power and interest they have (are expected to have) over the Network, and the stakeholder involvement strategy that should be applied when communicating and working with them, are as given in the table below:

Stakeholder	Interest	Power	Stakeholder Involvement Strategy
	(S – small; M – medium; H – high)	(S – small; M – medium; H – high)	O – Observe; I – Inform regularly; S - Keep them satisfied; M - Manage
Embassies	L	M	S
DG Near	L	H	S
DG Regio	L	H	S
DG Agri	M	H	S
Large scale business organizations	M	H	S
Universities, Institutes	M	L	O/I
Chambers	M	L	O/I
Ministries, agencies	M	M	O/I
Media and social media	M	H	S/M
We Effect	H	H	H
GIZ	M	H	M
Municipalities	H	L	I
Community structures	H	L	I
Grassroots CSOs	H	M	I
USAID, FAO, UN and donor organisations	H	H	M
Cooperatives	H	H	M
SMEs	H	L	I
SWG	H	M	I
Consultants (individuals and companies)	H	H	M
Regional development agencies	H	H	M
Women economic clusters and similar CSOs	H	M	I

National parks and agencies for management of protected areas	H	M	I/M
Tourist operators	H	M	M
Consumer organizations	H	H	M
Advisory services	H	M	M
Farmer organizations	H	H	M
LAG ad CLLD initiatives	H	H	M
EU CSO networks (PREPARE, ELARD, EU CAP Network, EFB…)	H	H	M
BRDN member organizations and their constituents	H	H	M

Table 1: BRDN stakeholder mapping according to interest and power

Considering the list of stakeholders (which is non-conclusive), it is evident that BRDN has a wide range of stakeholders, varying from policy and decision-makers at local and national level, donor-organisations and similar networks, to academic community, extension services, grassroots organisations and rural communities themselves. All these are potential associates, supporters and project partners through which the network could deliver its planned objectives and results, and which should be managed and involved in the organisation's work in accordance to the project or assignment it implements.

6. Methodology used for the design of the strategy

This BRDN-Strategy 2023-2027 was developed in a participatory and interactive way. It included the revision of existing organizational plans and BRDN's strategy document for 2018-2022, as well as a participatory planning workshop with the BRDN member representatives from Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Hercegovina (BiH), Albania, North Macedonia and Croatia.

6.1. Participatory Strategy Workshop with the BRDN members

This strategy is based on the planning workshop with the BRDN members in November 2022, where they all reflected about future work priorities for the BRDN. The participatory workshop was organized for 1,5 days and used the Compass of Local Competitiveness as a tool for strategy design. The results of the workshop were used as the main relevant input for this strategy.

6.2. Core visualized values and criteria of BRDN for its members

"A picture is worth a thousand words" is an aphorism meaning that complex and multiple ideas can be conveyed by a single image which conveys its meaning or essence more effectively than a verbal description. During the participatory Planning Workshop in November 2022, the BRDN Secretariat and the RDNs expressed the core value of the BRDN for each of them in a visualized way. Several characteristics about the meaning of the BRDN for its members came out of this reflection. The expressed main characteristics are summarized in the following (see also visualizations in figure 1):

BRDN as a platform for joint rural regional growth: The BRDN is seen as a platform that provides the opportunity for the rural areas as well as the RDNs in the Balkan to grow. “The BRDN provides the chance to be greater than the sum of its part” was mentioned. The regional network thus provides additional opportunities for all the national rural networks that are not possible to reach without joined efforts.

BRDN as a trustful and supportive integrator: Several drawings expressed family images and network related values. The BRDN has already created a very trustful relationship between the RDNs. Continuing this trustful and supportive path in which all members can cocreate jointly the agenda of the BRDN and where also the weaker networks are supported equally, is seen as an important characteristic of the BRDN at present and in the future.

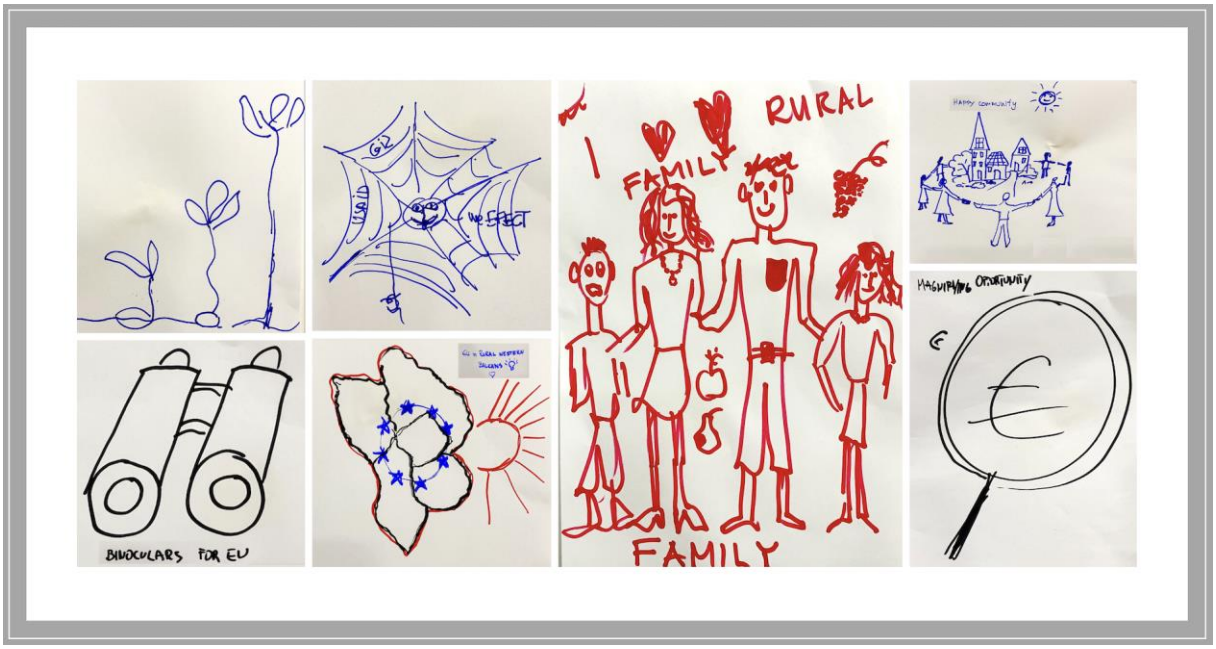


Figure 1 : Member´s visualized perspective on BRDN

BRDN as a driver of EU trends in the rural Western Balkan sphere: The EU agenda setting and support programs including LEADER, IPARD, GAWB also require a strong rural development perspective. The BRDN is seen as a platform that drives this direction as well as makes use of the upcoming opportunities.

BRDN as a strategic network for reaching out to funds for implementation of concrete development initiatives: The BRDN is seen as a strategic organization that can support in the access to EU finance to finally support the national networks in their rural development efforts.
BRDN as a vehicle to learn from other EU examples and to position itself beyond the WB region: The "binocular for the EU" (see figure 1, left) symbolizes the opportunities for learning from EU examples and trends, from methodologies and tools regarding rural development. It also entails a strategic consideration to position the Western Balkan rural networks in the context of the EU Green Deal and GAWB with the obligation to search for opportunities with other partners inside the WB and the EU.
BRDN as strategic actor to communicate and coordinate with other funding partners: BRDN is seen as a platform that provides the opportunity to strategically position the national rural networks in front of other donors and funding organizations. The "Spider´s" role here is related to the need to keep communication channels and to convince other partners to cooperate with each other in favor of the development of the rural areas in the Western Balkan.

6.3. The Compass tool and main identified working areas

For the identification of key strategic areas of work for the BRDN, the tool "**Compass of Local Competitiveness**[5]"was used. It is a participatory method that combines strategizing, action planning and monitoring in a participatory way. In the beginning, it was mainly used in territorial and cluster development initiatives and later for organizational development purposes.
The core objective of the Compass is to identify critical success factors for the development of an organization. It is an effective strategy and planning instrument that helps to identify concrete change initiatives along four critical areas. It should finally contribute to a dynamic and learning-oriented organizational development process. The tool was used in the participatory workshop with the RDNs as members of the BRDN.
The Compass is based on experience of organizations and their key relevant development areas. Organizations strive for being financially sustainable in a way that they can ensure impact to sustain their purpose. Nonetheless, to be financially successful or self-sufficient three other relevant preconditions must be in place.

1. **First**, the organization must assure a continuous internal learning process to improve the management and product/service capabilities in response to the members' needs. Continuous efforts for knowledge and skills upgrade, and the institutionalisation of

[5] The Compass tool is based on the business strategy tool "Balanced Scorecard" and was developed by the consultancy company Mesopartner.

structures that assure continuous internal learning loops, are the prerequisites for long lasting success.

2. **Second**, there is a need for an aligned direction. This alignment must be promoted through intensive communication and coordination between the staff, management, and members of the organization. "Internal alignment and cooperation" with the members of an organization like ours is necessary in the longer run to also have sustainable success.
3. **Third**, there are strategic partners outside the organization and its members, that are highly relevant for us to cooperate with. These strategic partners can be governmental entities, businesses, non-government organizations, or individuals that are relevant to be connected to and cooperate with to assure impact in the larger context. A conducive relationship with key external actors to assure the implementation of the strategy is relevant.
4. **Fourth**, successful performance in the above-described fields of action will enable us to assure impact and financial sustainability. An organization should be able to monitor its work according to the impact and reputation of its work for its members.

According to these four fields for action of a successful organization, the Compass is structured into four quadrants. Along each quadrant, critical success factors (see also Hexagon figure 3) are identified, work areas, milestones and activities defined and possibly also indicators for monitoring of progress set.

The figure 2 provides an overview of the four quadrants, the sequence, areas, and questions that were asked in the workshop.

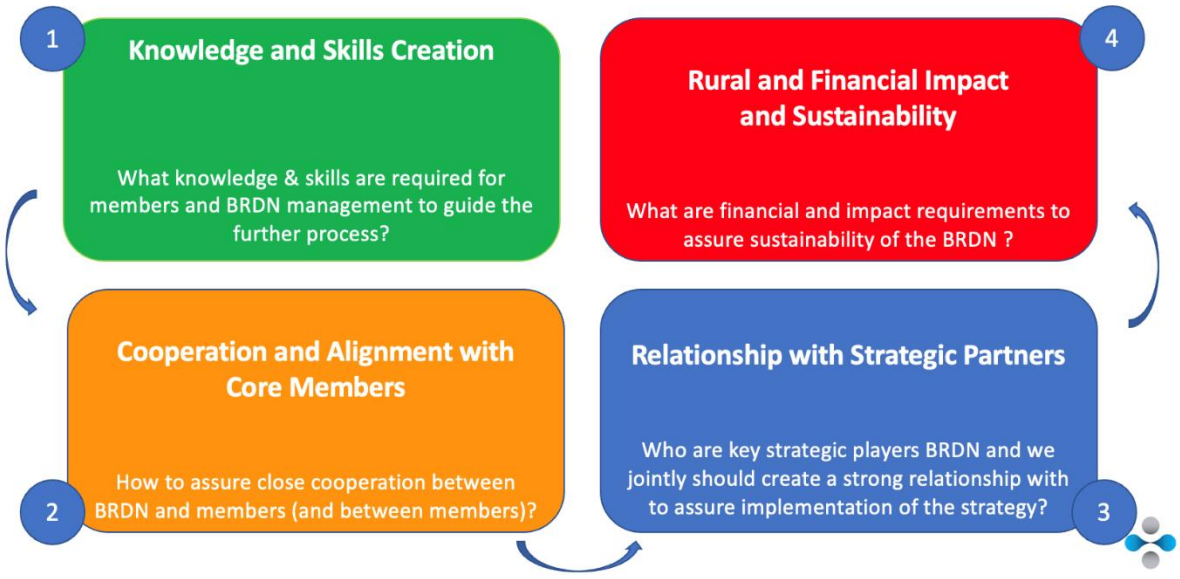


Figure **2** *:The Compass of Competitiveness and its key questions for the BRDN future*

6.4. Identification of critical success factors for BRDN

The members of the BRDN identified the critical success factors that are documented in the Hexagon in figure 3. It visualizes two main considerations:

First, the role of the BRDN to represent and strengthen the RDNs towards outside partners and strategic actors. Here, the positioning of the BRDN as a competent representative on innovative rural development and agriculture in the WB/ EU, the visibility as core actor with its unique expertise and network outreach, as well as its capacity to open doors for the finance of regional projects were stressed out.

Second, the role of the BRDN to strengthen the internal learning and implementation of concrete activities within the RDNs and between them was expressed. Critical issues mentioned here were the promotion of effective bottom-up solutions and processes, the contribution with expertise and innovative knowledge on relevant future topics, and the promotion of peer-to-peer-to learning.

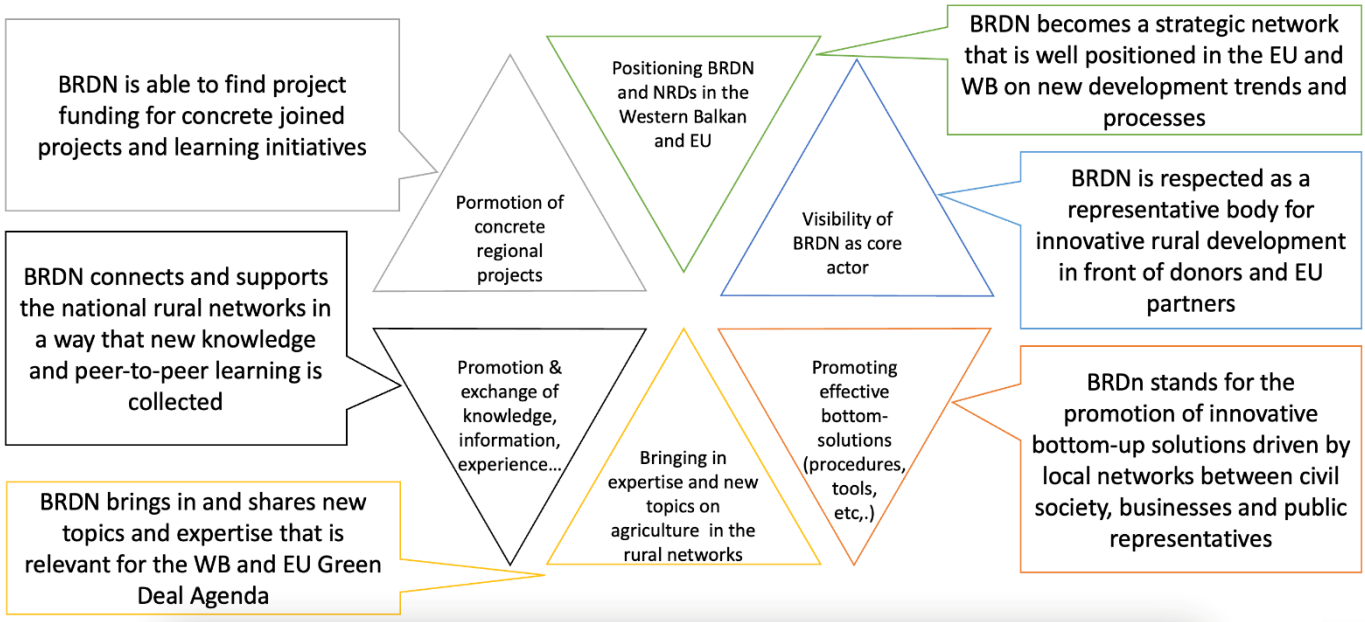


Figure **3***:The Hexagon of critical success factors for the future of the BRDN*

These critical success factors for the future of BRDN (see summary in figure 3) helped BRDN to define the core working areas (figure 4) along the different quadrants of the Compass.

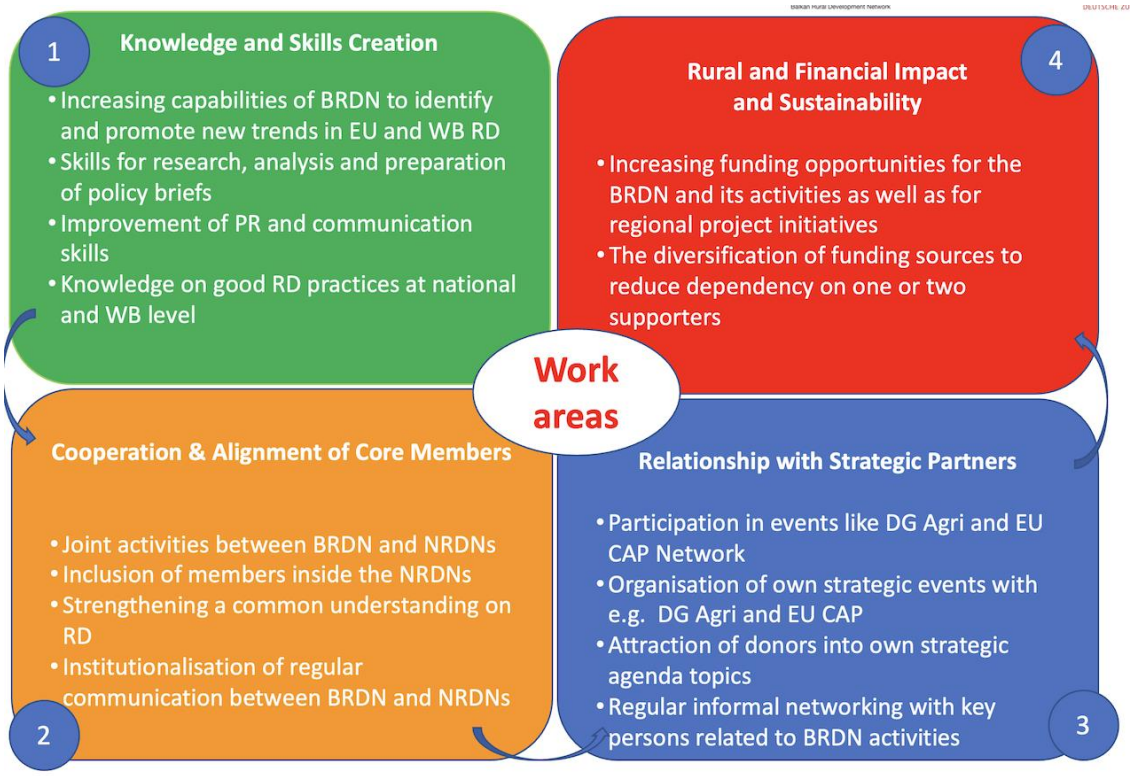


Figure 4: Core identified working areas for the BRDN

7. Strategic Tenets

7.1. Organisational vision, mission, and values

The BRDN has defined its vision and mission already in the earlier Strategy from 2018 to 2022. Both will continue to be valid.

- **VISION**

Rural areas in the Western Balkans are prosperous and sustainable, offering fair socio-economic opportunities and livelihood

- **MISSION**

BRDN is voice of the Western Balkan rural communities by advocating for inclusive rural development policies and supporting development activities, through regional cooperation and strengthening the national rural development networks.

VALUES

- Equal opportunities
- Networking, participation and integration
- Diversity
- Enthusiasm
- Transparency and accountability
- Professionalism
- Continous learning
- Result orientation

1. Equal opportunities – BRDN will strive for socio-economic opportunities in rural areas in the Balkan region

2. Networking, participation and integration – BRDN aims to work with all rural stakeholders, integrate different policy and programme solutions with aim to attain rural development and enable opportunities for BRDN constituents to shape and improve services provided by RDN.

4. Diversity – Inclusion of various groups and stakeholder initiatives in BRDN programmes will offer power and strength that brings us together

5. Enthusiasm – Instigating and supporting initiatives of BRDN members, acting in constructive and appreciative manner

6. Transparency and accountability - Integrity towards our constituents and stakeholders by ensuring that the performance of BRDN is measured against the strategic objectives which are available to interested parties

7. Professionalism — Building and maintaining a highly skilled, diverse, and compassionate staff and associates focused on quality, excellence and good rapport with internal and external stakeholders

8. Continuous learning – Offering opportunities for professional growth of staff and stakeholders.

9. Results Orientation — Measuring performance and making management decisions to direct resources to where they are used most effectively.

7.2. Strategic objectives

The BRDN's overall aim is to contribute to facilitate the positive change in which the national rural development organizations will act, to deliver specific results for their constituents' and enhance the overall rural development potential of the countries, in a sustainable and effective manner.

Having in mind the identified critical success factors and the defined core working areas, BRDN defines the following specific objectives for the strategic period 2023-2027:

- Strategic Objective 1:

Positioning the BRDN as a driving force for regional EU integration processes in the field of rural development, through strengthening the regional mechanisms for **advocacy and lobbying**.

- Strategic Objective 2:

BRDN connects and supports the rural development networks, through **networking**, **exchange of information, innovation, knowledge and experience**, to become relevant and accountable voice of rural communities in the WB.

- Strategic Objective 3:

BRDN **develops capacities and expertise** to bring and share innovative EU rural development practices to accelerate the adoption and approximation of the EU policies relevant for the WB rural development.

- Strategic Objective 4:

Recognizing and acknowledging BRDN as a respected and representative actor for regional affirmation of innovative rural development process in the WB, through enhanced **communication, promotion and visibility**.

7.3. Main thematic focus

The needs of the rural population are complex, and the issues are more of a social nature than purely agricultural. Better quality of life in rural communities should be provided for everybody – old and young, men and women. Hence, BRDN aims to contribute to reforming the longstanding tradition of rural development policies to an integrated policy approach, by focusing its work in the strategic period 2023-2027, on the following main areas:

- **Environment Protection, Climate Change and Green Economy**

Substantial efforts are made by countries worldwide to make their development greener and more environment-friendly, with the EU clearly stating its own plans of becoming the world's first climate-neutral continent by 2050 reflected in the EU new growth strategy – the Green Deal.

Leading to the Western Balkans (WB), the EU has made it clear that the European Green Deal will apply to the countries in the WB region as well, with targets to be agreed both by 2030 (Agenda 2030) as well as 2050. With this in mind, BRDN will support the implementation of the "Green Agenda for the Western Balkans" as an important framework for the WB countries.

- **Sustainable food systems/ food security**

The existing food systems in Western Balkan are not appropriate to respond to increasing recurrence of pandemics, droughts, floods, forest fires, new pests and other external threats that discourage rural people to continue with agricultural activities and to ensure sufficient supply of affordable and healthy food for citizens. Therefore, the shift to a more sustainable food system is needed to bring environmental, health and social benefits, offer economic gains and ensure that resilience to future crisis is secured and quality of life of our people is improved. Western Balkan should utilise the Farm to Fork strategy providing support to inventing different approaches in food system promoting more fair and inclusive agriculture with more focus on organic and regenerative agriculture principles. The small-scale farmers which are common characteristic throughout all Balkan regions should be well addressed with their needs ensuring their sustainable livelihood.

As of 2023, BRDN and its members will implement the EU funded project "*Farm to Fork Academy for Green Western Balkans – Our shared European future"* with aim to create a better environment for CSOs and CSO Networks to proactively contribute to addressing societal challenges related to climate changes and biodiversity losses through building competencies able to assist farming and rural communities toward green and just transition across the region, and at the same time to sustain participatory and constructive policy dialogue to accelerate the alignment with the EU Green Deal and F2F Strategy.

- **LEADER/CLLD**

By practicing the bottom-up approach, the BRDN members have taken initial steps towards introduction of the concept of EU LEADER in the WB-6 countries, as a vehicle for local economic growth, social inclusion, and decentralization of public interventions.

BRDN and its member-networks, will continue to be an active participant in LEADER type projects and will actively support the capacity building process of the Local Action Groups (LAGs) and LAG initiatives in the Western Balkan countries. Strengthening the bottom-up approach will also facilitate the alignment to the EU strategy for Community-led Local Development (CLLD), which puts people's experiences and knowledge on the driving seat for finding local solutions.

- **Rural Youth inclusion and participation in the rural development process**

There is a worrying process of rural out-migration of young people in Western Balkans, driven by the unequal opportunities for education, careers and social life. This exodus distorts the balance in the population; reduces the workforce and the potential for economic development; and can

cause a vicious cycle of falling population, loss of rural services and further weakening of rural communities. We believe that ways must be found to encourage and enable young people to stay in or return to the countryside. Young people need a variety of satisfying and fairly-paid jobs, a well-targeted education system, access to land, housing and credit, social and cultural activities suited for young people, and support for young farmers, new entrants and entrepreneurs. The interests of rural youth should be put at the Centre of rural development strategy and the policies should include specific measures targeted at young people. Investments are necessary in better education and vocational training to close the gap between quality of education and the needs of modern economy, sport facilities, and child care. Improvement of the quality of roads and public transport is necessary to facilitate commuting to rural towns. The provision of transport of young people to places of education and training is necessary to support their upskilling and career opportunities.

BRDN recognizes and meets the needs of youth in rural areas, and will work on enabling young people to actively participate in decision-making processes and rural initiatives.

- **Promotion of gender equality and integration of gender mainstreaming in national and regional rural development policies**

We believe that women should be recognized as key drivers in rural development, and as guardians of tradition and heritage in rural areas. BRDN recognizes the needs of women in rural areas in the WB region; supports and stimulates their creative role in rural life through the work of the BRDN Gender Equality Hub; and works to improve their inclusion in decision-making processes, for example within community service organisations and local action groups.

Rural development policies should be gender sensitive and increase the capacity of rural women and their organizations to drive in all aspects of rural life. Municipalities should provide support to training in leadership, business entrepreneurship, IT, new technologies, which is paramount to achieve better involvement of women in economic and social development and overcome some deeply rooted prejudices. BRDN will actively engage in these processes by providing opportunities for networking, share of experience, capacity building, awareness raising and regional advocacy for the needs of the rural women.

- **Social entrepreneurship as a model for rural community development**

In the rural areas of the Western Balkans, growing numbers of people are affected by poverty and social exclusion of different kinds. Sustained effort is needed in order to promote their inclusion and full participation in society. Social entrepreneurship may have a key role in that process, by providing social and other services- for example care for old people, employment for handicapped people – which are not adequately provided by the public and private sectors. Social enterprises may include the processing of local products, the continuance of traditional skills, the installation of renewable energy sources, and other activity which arises from identified local

needs and which enables the employment of marginalized groups. In many parts of our countries, this is a relatively new idea: but we believe that it has significant potential.

BRDN will get actively involved in the development of social entrepreneurship in the WB countries, by sharing good practices, participating in creation of support policies and developing capacities.

8. ACTION PLANNING FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGY ALONG KEY MILESTONES

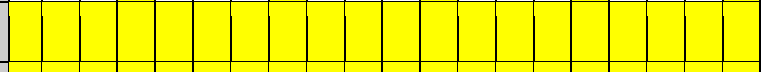
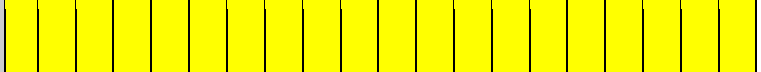
8.1. Differentiation between short-term, medium-term, and longer-term activities

The BRDN is aware that it cannot implement the long list of activities and strategic milestones in "one go". The strategic milestones are prioritized and scheduled in short-term (until end of 2023), mid-term (until end of 2024) and long-term timelines (from 2025 onwards). Emphasis is given to short- and medium-term activities. For the long-term activities from 2025 onwards it will be necessary to regularly update and adjust the strategy with its members.

Work plan of the BRDN Strategy 2023-2027

The following work plan provides a structured overview of the milestones and activities.

Strategic Milestones and Key Activities	2023				2024				2025				2026				2027			
	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4
Capacity development																				
Training for development of skills for preparation of position papers/ policy briefs																				
Organizing ToT for preparation of LDS																				
Training for developing PR skills																				
F2F Academy ToT																				
Assessment of the quality of the services of the RDNs towards their members and preparation of training																				
Study visits to the region and EU																				
Peer-to-peer learning events with EU rural networks																				
Development of a toolbox for LDS development																				
Support in service design of NRDNs																				
Preparation of the tool and guide for project proposal writing for LAGs and LAG initiatives																				
Preparation of full application for organization of ERP 2024																				
Preparation of regional studies, analyses, and research																				
Networking, exchange of information, innovation, knowledge and experience																				
Quarterly meetings of the BRDN assembly																				
Organization of Balkan Rural Parliament																				

Organization of regional International Rural Women Day	
Organization of regional Rural Youth Camp	
Organization of regional LAG Fest	
Joint implementation of regional events on different themes	
Annual Assembly meeting of BRDN and members	
Joint implementation of regional projects	
Organizing meetings of the Thematic Hubs	
Advocacy and lobbying	
Participation in events of strategic partners like DG Agri, SWG, EU CAP Network etc.	
Preparation of regional position papers on different topics	
Promotion of themes and policy publications to influence policy creation in the WB	
Presentation of the Declarations and conclusions of the regional events to relevant decision – makers (BRP, IRWD, Youth Camp, LAG Fest)	
Communication, promotion and visibility	
Interactive communication via social networks (Twitter, LinkedIn etc)	
Maintain and update the information and media content on BRDN website and Social networks	
Produce and publish BRDN E-Bulletin	
Organize regional conferences/events/press releases	
Represent BRDN in events organized by EU institutions (conferences, seminars, trainings…)	
Regular gatherings for promotion of BRDN and attracting strategic partners such as donors and EU partners at national (in each of the WB countries), regional and EU level	

In accordance with the **Article 20** of the **Statute of BRDN**, the Assembly members gave their consent for adoption of the **Development Strategy of BRDN for 2023-2027**, by electronic means, on 29.12.2022.

With this, the **Development Strategy of BRDN for 2023-2027 is officially adopted.**

Petar Gjorgievski **Date:**

President of BRDN **30.12.2022**