



EU Integration, Political Parties, and Regional Initiatives in the Western Balkans

Introduction

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) convened a roundtable discussion on October 19-20, 2019 in Skopje, North Macedonia, for a number of senior political party officials of the Western Balkan countries to address the region's internal and external challenges on the path to democratic consolidation and European Union membership. The goal of the initiative is to increase regional cooperation and coordination on internal political and economic reforms and to help resolve bilateral disputes. The participants said that their countries should implement reforms to primarily improve the lives of their citizens and only secondarily for membership in the EU. Membership in the EU should not be a goal in itself, but rather a result of the region's good governance.

The roundtable is part of a CIG initiative on regional cooperation and democratic development supported by and implemented in cooperation with the German Federal Foreign Office.

The countries in the region are economically and politically interdependent. As EU's decision to postpone the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania illustrates, Albania's internal political strife is also North Macedonia's problem when it comes to EU integration. Countries have different challenges but common aspirations. Albania face largely internal challenges, while North Macedonia dealt with both internal and external problems and managed to address them successfully, but, some said, missed the "fast EU integration train." Montenegro has good relations with neighbors but faces a number of challenges in reforming its democratic system. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Kosovo are still haunted by the legacy of conflict and internal and external outstanding disputes remain in the way of reform. The status dispute between Kosovo and Serbia affects the entire region. Therefore, the region's voice on the outstanding disputes is important.

The report is based on the roundtable discussions held under the Chatham House Rule. The participants took part in the discussions in their personal capacities. We have tried to be accurate and balanced in summarizing the discussions, and ask for the understanding of participants whose remarks may have not been fully captured in this brief report. The report does not necessarily reflect the views of CIG and the German Federal Foreign Office.

Shared challenges, common future

The Western Balkan countries are more or less on the same boat in relations to EU membership. Regional cooperation is essential in resolving political disputes and strengthening economic and social cooperation. The countries in the region have common aspirations and goals. They need to agree to cooperate more on the road to achieving these common goals. The countries in the region need more self-confidence for cooperation with each other and with the EU. There is a lot of common ground on which to base this cooperative relationship. Many said that the region would be stronger and louder if it spoke with one voice not only on EU integration but also on such issues as the brain drain, trade, and education.

Implement reforms primarily for domestic development. The Western Balkan countries should do more themselves and rely less on the EU in fulfilling their conditions for EU membership. They should do the reforms for their citizens, and not because the EU requires them. The reforms are needed with or without the EU membership. The Western Balkan countries are also less dependent on the EU support than many think, having sufficient domestic capacities to accelerate the reform process. The narrative that “we are doing the reforms for the EU” should change into “we are doing the reforms for ourselves.”

Increase institutional capacity and resilience. Temporary obstacles such as EU’s postponing of opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia should not discourage the Western Balkan countries to continue with the reforms. The EU decision might disrupt the process a little, but the countries need to build internal consensus on a long-term vision and move forward with implementation. Such obstacles should serve to strengthen the resilience of the region. A speaker said that to those who say that North Macedonia “gave up everything and got nothing,” the answer is that North Macedonia made the name compromise to advance reforms and build good relations with its neighbors, not as a favor to the EU. “We did the compromise for ourselves.” The Balkan countries need to convince the EU that they are doing the reforms for themselves. However, some speakers said that some EU demands, such as “asking Macedonia to change its name” are illogical and violate EU values. “Pushing countries to change their names, and thus part of their identity, is not a European value.” Some suggested that the region would get more disappointing news in the process but needs to learn to manage it.

Make the region more attractive for the EU. The Balkan countries need to make the EU want them, not fear them. They should seek to become serious partners with the EU, not just ask for help and perceive themselves as dependent on the Union. Balkan countries need to resolve some of the disputes on their own, not always wait for the EU mediation. In other words, the governments and leaders in the region need to leave petty politics aside and address the disputes in a genuine manner with the goal of reaching solutions. The practice so far has shown that the leaders engage in problem-solving negotiations to precisely delay solutions and prolong their own stay in power. The region needs

institutional ways to resolve problems, not deals between leaders. EU should support institutions and democracy in the Western Balkan political parties, not individuals.

Political parties and reforms

Political parties globally are becoming the least respected component of the democratic system. They have evolved over the decades from ideologically distinctive towards more generic ‘catch all’ parties, all favoring free market and small government. Partisan attachments are in decline with younger, better-educated citizens who have lower levels of party loyalty, even though they seem to have higher political interest and engagement. Younger generations are concerned more with the quality of life issues than national concerns. Values of democracy are not deeply rooted in the Balkan young democracies. Many speakers said that political parties are not institutionally strong and stable and often controlled by individuals or group of individuals. Most of the party founders in the region are still leading their parties. Some parties resemble to what is known as ‘cartel parties’ run by self-interested power-seeking elites. Some say that politicians also inherited anti-democratic attitudes from the previous communist systems in which differences in opinions were not tolerated. Many suggested that institutionally strong parties and their performance capabilities are a key condition for consolidating democracy.

Address democratic deficit in the region. The region needs to work more on democratization and policy development. Parties are seen as business instruments to get rich through privileged access to national resources and enjoy the perks of office. Some speakers said that many parties have authoritarian party leaderships, and that they need to take the power from such leaderships and decentralize decision-making. The EU can help with party development. Corruption is the main culprit in the path to democratic development. “Governments change but corruption stays.” Politics in the region has become a synonym for corruption. Politicians nowadays are associated with lying, cheating, and stealing, and there is plenty of truth in such a perception. Politicians lying and stealing with impunity is becoming a socially accepted standard. Parties need urgently to build public trust and change the culture of impunity.

More policy, less politics. Political parties should focus more on performance and reform, and less on winning elections. Many said that monetary profit is driving their agendas more than public interest. Parties should engage more with the public, listen to their concerns and include them in their policy agendas. Parties should also change the culture of deals between leaders and turn it into deals based on public interest. Increasing public pressure in this regard is also important.

Improve communication between parties and voters. Parties usually communicate with their voters during election campaigns. And the campaigns serve leaders to ask for votes rather than listen to the voter’s preferences and concerns. Studies show that the distrust in democratic institutions in the region is growing and more and more people are looking for a better life outside the region.

Governing and opposition parties should share responsibility and credit. The relations between governing and opposition parties in the region are tense. They rarely cooperate even on issues of national interest. These parties should share both the responsibility and credit for their countries' failures and successes. Many speakers said that the "blame game is hurting their countries' reputation abroad and their parties' credibility at home." Parties should establish cooperation within the system and not on ad hoc agreements and deals between the leaders. The opposition should be included in developing legislation, not just voting on it. Governing parties should consider the opposition's proposals seriously and work on getting their buy-in on key issues. The national interest should be defined in a broader way. Party competition during elections and party cooperation in policy implementation during governance should be based on democratic values and principles, not on the whims of individual political leaders. Some said that Balkan societies are not polarized on national issues, that the polarization is only between individual leaders. Regular roundtables/retreats of leaders of main parliamentary parties should be organized on national levels.

Political reform is needed. Many countries of the region must consider a serious reform of its electoral systems. Reform of the rules governing financing of political parties should also be pursued and the system needs to be improved. Jobs of MPs should be professionalized.

Regional priorities and initiatives

Speakers pondered whether the Balkan countries could do something together to advance their common goal to bring the region closer to the EU political and economic standards. Despite their differences on how they perceive a number of disputes, they can work on isolating differences and advancing points of agreement. EU is considered as a tool for stability and development and the only alternative to the region. "We do not have anything better." But if the EU slows down the integration process also because of its internal issues, the region does not have to sit and wait: it can take initiatives that create stability and development and thus speed up the integration process. While the EU has been reluctant in formal steps to integration, it has always been willing to support regional initiatives. The Berlin process is a good example of the EU's commitment to the region. Some speakers also suggested avoiding becoming entangled into great power disputes. "Let's not be pawns on others' chessboards, but instead focus on protecting the interests of our own constituents." The Western Balkan countries are too small to resolve global issues. They should resolve the multiple problems at home, join EU and work on influencing the world as EU members.

The participants articulated a number of rough priorities and initiatives that could be addressed jointly. Many said that the EU political, economic, and financial support is crucial for the domestic initiatives to be successful. The EU support is also important to manage overcome the distrust that the countries in the region have towards one another.

Make borders insignificant. The region should cooperate in liberalizing movement of goods, people, and capital to increase competition and productivity and consequently

improve economic standing. All Balkan countries should be part of such an initiative. A free and fair trade agreement whereby political and administrative barriers are lifted would benefit everyone. A number of participants had some reservations about such a project that is now primarily pushed by Belgrade, Tirana, and Skopje. Pristina and Podgorica seem to be reluctant to join in, especially that the initiative has few details, though in principle everyone supported such an idea. Some said that the idea is good but were not sure whether the leaders are genuine about it or are just pretending to do something. "Their actions do not match their words." Perhaps not each country would benefit equally, but these are challenges to be addressed in the discussions so that the agreement is not only free but also fair, so that each country benefits equally. Some countries would benefit more than others in the short run. Countries with better production capacities benefit more in the beginning but such imbalances could be corrected through a number of temporary measures, such as quotas or subsidies. No free trade is fully free. The EU in principle supports such initiatives but would like to know more about this initiative. In principle, it is in line with the EU values. The core principle of the EU is to make the borders insignificant. But the process should involve all Balkan countries and should work together with the Berlin process. Equality and solidarity are key in developing an EU-style regional market. A speaker reported that truck drivers spent 26 millions hours waiting in border crossings in the Western Balkans, a region of about 20 million people.

Dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo should continue. The dispute affects the future of both Kosovo and Serbia but also indirectly harms the entire region. The dialogue should resume as soon as possible. The countries in the region could help the two through mediation and facilitation efforts. The international community should continue to be the main facilitator of the process.

Accelerate reform on rule of law and governance. There was consensus that the region is suffering from democratic deficit. Inadequate rule of law in the region is frequently mentioned as the main obstacle to the region's economic development and EU integration. Political parties should engage more in proposing laws and amendments and lobby with their governing institutions to speed up implementation process. Many speakers said that there is a wide gap between adoption and implementation of reforms. The Balkan countries could cooperate in helping each other implement Chapter 23 on the rule of law. The EU could also help the region in establishing mechanisms and practices to fight corruption and organized crime.

Address brain drain and emigration. The Balkans is losing its population faster than any other region in Europe. The immigration of professionals, such as doctors and engineers, will have detrimental long-term consequences for the region's economic development. The region should cooperate in creating opportunities for their populations at home. Internally, the countries should reform their education systems to make them more compatible with the labor markets.

Improve security cooperation. The Balkan countries should establish regional cooperation among their police and intelligence institutions aiming to fight cross-border

organized crime and tackle security issues. Security cooperation also helps build trust among the countries. Political parties could help reform their existing legislation to bring them in line with the EU requirements.

Identify joint regional projects. The countries should identify joint projects that connect the region and support economic development. Such projects can be financed jointly by the countries of the region. The telephone roaming agreement started as an idea at the Skopje Digital Summit. There is another digital summit in Tirana in April 2021 and perhaps the countries could reach an agreement there on eliminating the roaming fees. The region has already signed an agreement to reduce the roaming fees.

Share experiences and lessons learned on EU integration process. The Balkans countries are in different stages of EU integration and they could share their challenges and lessons learned with each other. The countries of the Western Balkans should sit down and discuss how they themselves are responsible for the creating the current unfortunate situation with the EU enlargement.

Define regional reform agenda and national goals. The countries should make practical issues—education, healthcare, and employment—national priorities. The voters are increasingly focused on quality of life rather than on abstract issues, such as building up armies.

Participants

English Alphabetical Order

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