

Regional Cooperation on Common Threats

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) convened its third regional roundtable for senior political party officials from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The meeting took place on June 23, 2020 via teleconference. The COVID-19 pandemic altered the regional dynamics and priorities. The countries focused on the pandemic and economic issues while the bilateral and regional conflicts for long being at the forefront finally took the back seat. The Western Balkans regional cooperation on the pandemic was solid, with governments cooperating in border management, coordinating quarantine issues, and sharing medical expertise and even staff. Preserving this momentum will be a challenge as the pandemic concerns recede and politicians return to their old-style politics.

The meeting's purpose was to exchange experiences in fighting the pandemic, discuss lessons learned, evaluate cooperation to date, and agree on what kind of regional cooperation would be needed during a probable second wave. Ultimately, the initiative on regional cooperation aims to make help make the Western Balkan cooperation a normal occurrence and utilize it to resolve the outstanding bilateral and regional political conflicts, thus eliminating one of the main hurdles toward EU membership.

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 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.

Introduction

During the first two months of the pandemic, the countries of the region dealt relatively well with the crisis. All of the countries have introduced restrictive measures in order to prevent the spread of the virus resulting in a comparatively low number of infections and deaths due to COVID-19. The most restrictive measures were introduced in Serbia, with a curfew and limits on movement of citizens. On the other hand, the economies have effectively stopped and showed that the measures cannot be applied indefinitely and the economic crisis is looming.

Regional cooperation has more or less stalled with the crisis. The much-awaited EU-Western Balkans Zagreb Summit in March was held online. While it did reaffirm the European perspective for the region, many felt that the interest of the EU for the enlargement has

weakened significantly. After the summit, the countries slowly focused on themselves and on coping with the effects of the pandemic. All of the countries closed their borders. The initial reaction from the EU was sluggish, as it treated the region as an external area. This was used by a number of external actors, most importantly China, but also Russia, who offered assistance to some of the countries in the region. Eventually, the EU regained its balance and provided major assistance to the region. But damage for the EU image has been made.

Some cooperation and communication did take place in the region. Health ministers of Kosovo and Serbia reached an informal agreement on cooperation in fighting the pandemic. Despite its benefits some local nationalists politicized the agreement in a negative way. However, it remains a positive step upon which new initiatives could be built in the future. There were other offers for help and cooperation within the region but many were met with suspicion that there was a sinister political agenda behind.

Suddenly in June the countries of the region rushed to open up and to abolish the restrictive measures. In Serbia in particular, the measures were quickly abolished, probably due to the June 21 parliamentary elections. However, by the end of June, in almost all of the countries the number of infected grew rapidly, and now it looks like the second wave of the virus has arrived.

A joint fight against a common threat

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic did not hit the Western Balkans as hard as some other countries and regions in Europe and beyond. However, it exposed many weaknesses related to the regional cooperation and bilateral relations between the countries, but also within the countries themselves. Several participants criticized the governments for first declaring and then using the state of emergency for further institutional control and promoting themselves as peacemakers internationally. “Such moves would not have been implemented without the state of emergency that was introduced due to pandemic, causing a lower level of public attention and inability of citizens to react.”

Despite the domestic democratic backsliding in most of the countries, regional cooperation was in fact substantial. Many speakers focused on the evaluation of the regional cooperation during the pandemic. Despite the initial inertia and political friction, the countries showed openness and will to help the others, even outside of the region. Serbia, for example, sent a shipment of medical supplies to Italy. Kosovo and Serbia had a decent cooperation, with Belgrade sending medical staff to the Serb-majority areas in Kosovo while Pristina giving a donation to the Albanian majority areas in Serbia. The crisis showed that the region needs cooperation not only on political issues but also in the areas such as health and economy. It also needs a better understanding of the benefits of cooperation, and not only during difficult times but also during “normal” times.

“Solidarity and responsibility should be the two most important words in the region,” a participant said.

Serbia and Kosovo showed that they are capable of putting aside their old political differences to cooperate on the fight against the disease. In this informal agreement between Kosovo and Serbia to establish cooperation in fighting COVID-19, Serbia offered help with medical staff for Serb-majority municipalities and established temporary COVID-19 hospitals in three such municipalities. While a politically sensitive issue, the then-Kosovo

government agreed that the Serbian medical staff could work in medical facilities and hospitals in the Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo. Kosovo in return offered help for the Albanian community in Serbia's Presevo Valley. It was discouraging that political rivals used this "sensitive cooperation" to attack their political opponents to promote themselves and their parties. So, unfortunately this cooperation became a subject for unnecessary political fights and accusations. As a participant said, "cooperation on these matters should be based on professionalism and honesty, leaving politics aside."

The EU also helped and often facilitated cooperation among the countries in the region. A participant said that the help of the EU member states is always appreciated, "However, it is about time to show more responsibility and take matters into our own hands," the participant underlined. "This would be a powerful signal to the EU too."

Some participants said that their countries, or some political parties within their countries, were suspicious about the help offered by others, believing it would be coupled with malicious political moves. Others emphasized that some of the external players (out of the region or EU) offered help just to some parts of a certain country and avoided to help the country as a whole. "This is a bad practice that sends a wrong political message when people should focus on solidarity."

A participant said that the crisis has provided a valuable lesson regarding the region's EU perspective, showing what it means to be out of the EU. He mentioned Croatia which as a member state got huge funds from the EU for fighting COVID-19. Countries in the region should thus strive to get to the EU membership as soon as possible, as it is hard for small countries to deal alone with enormous challenges that have a global impact.

Some participants said that the region should have acted as a whole during the crisis and should have established channels for cooperation on issues of common interest. A participant from Albania said that the country could have benefited from a regional sharing of experience in fighting the pandemic. "We could have had the opportunity maybe to do something different or have a better approach if we shared the experience." The participant proposed that this should be the approach if there would be a second wave of pandemic.

A participant said that now is the time to formulate a joint approach. He proposed establishment of a mechanism that would ensure a regular coordination and meetings of high officials from all countries in the region, at the level of prime ministers and/or ministers of health. Another participant said that this could be connected with the Berlin Process and the upcoming meeting that will be jointly organized by Bulgaria and North Macedonia: "This is something the Berlin Process is about." The pandemic will have a catastrophic impact on the EU and the region and its economic potential could be fully realized only through regional cooperation." The EU is preparing an economic stimulus package and there will be also funding for the region, but the region should be ready and able to absorb these funds. That is not guaranteed.

Another participant proposed the inclusion of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) that could act as a cornerstone of the regional cooperation including on the COVID-19 issues. Participants agreed to contact both Sofia and Skopje and to propose the integration of this approach in the upcoming Berlin Process meeting. All participants agreed to engage on this issue and to inform and cooperate with their North Macedonian colleagues, regular participants in this roundtable.

Finally, the participants discussed how to replicate the experience and cooperation in fighting COVID-19 in the other areas. Some participants from Serbia argued that the best approach would be for the countries in the region to accept the so-called Mini-Schengen initiative. “Political issues cannot be resolved without strengthening economies, and the Mini-Schengen provides a platform for that.” Other participants added that economic development is a continuous process and that there are opportunities for others to bring their ideas on how the Mini-Schengen could function.” However, they both emphasized that they do not understand why Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro are skeptical about this. Others replied that there is a great deal of unknown about the initiative and the three countries that started it should provide more transparency about it. They emphasized that others would participate in such an initiative if treated equally by all participating states. “The proposed initiative works only when all countries believe they will benefit proportionally.” The participants concluded that they should strive for a free and fair regional cooperation in which no one is left behind.

Participants

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Damir Masic, Member, Presidency, Social Democratic Party; Member, Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Igor Novakovic, Associate, Council for Inclusive Governance

Haris Plakalo, Member, Party of Democratic Action; General Secretary, European Movement of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Branko Ružić, Vice President, Socialist Party of Serbia; Minister of State Administration and Local Self-Governance of Serbia

Alex Roinishvili Grigorev, President, Council for Inclusive Governance

Xhelal Svecla, Member, Presidency, Self-Determination Movement (Kosovo)

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Ivan Vujovic, Secretary General, Social Democratic Party of Montenegro