

Parliamentary Cooperation and Common Interests

Introduction

On December 2, 2020, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized a roundtable via teleconference for members of parliaments of the Western Balkans. For a few years now, CIG has been organizing roundtables of MPs from Serbia and Kosovo. For this discussion, it increased the scope of the initiative to make it regional. Although the parliaments are not focused on day-to-day politics, they can play a substantial role in fostering regional cooperation and public diplomacy and advocacy to enhance contacts and collaboration between the countries in the region.

The objective of the discussion was to address the region's common challenges and interests and how the parliaments can address them. A particular focus was on the functioning of the parliaments during the global COVID-19 pandemic, exchanging of experience, support for regional interests and how parliaments can engage more on regional priorities. The roundtable is part of a larger CIG project on the relations between Kosovo and Serbia. The roundtable was supported by and implemented in cooperation with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. Additional support is provided by the Balkan Trust for Democracy of the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

Parliaments and coronavirus

Parliaments continued to work during the pandemic on an uneven scale. Some parliaments, like the one in Serbia, stopped working for a few months. A number of measures including social distancing and protective panels were introduced in plenary rooms to prevent eventual infections. Others adapted to online sessions. However, there were technical problems as software for online meetings was not developed, and so the parliaments and their committees could not catch up with their work. As one MP from Serbia stressed, "All parliaments have to go digital; because of the pandemic, all of our communication in the region is in peril." To mitigate this situation should be a regional project as there is no sense in wasting resources and funds for creating six distinct systems.

In Kosovo, a particular challenge was the fact the government fell and the new one was formed in the midst of the pandemic, causing confusion and increasing political struggle. As a Kosovo MP said, the tension continued even after the government led by Avdullah Hoti was constituted, and to this date, the government is having problems with passing laws as it lacks a majority in the parliament while citizens suffer the consequences.

Other speakers pointed out that during the pandemic national unity on most critical issues related to public health and economy is of greatest importance. "National unity is necessary now, and politics should be put aside." During past decades, there was a lack of investments in

healthcare, so the pandemic found the Balkans poorly prepared. Thus, trust building measures among politicians, especially in the parliaments are needed to establish a platform to provide maximum support for the citizens. As one opposition MP attested, “the role of the opposition is to criticize and to provide alternatives,” but not at the expense of citizens.

Parliaments and regional cooperation

Kosovo and Serbia displayed a positive example of cooperation during the pandemic. Despite the many unresolved political disputes between the two, they managed to establish concrete cooperation resulting in unhindered engagement of Serbian doctors and medical personnel in the Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo. The two health ministries also had a number of discussions on the measures and how to keep freedom of movement unaffected. Another positive example is the establishment of “green corridors,” transport routes for critical goods in the region that were kept open all the time.

But beyond the pandemic, there is an issue that MPs from the Western Balkans should tackle jointly. EU enlargement process is in peril. North Macedonia and Albania are blocked from opening the accession negotiations. While there is no doubt that the EU needs to add to credibility of the enlargement, through future joint action and messages to Brussels and the EU member states, MPs from the region itself should utilize their public diplomacy function to communicate better with their own citizens on this issue, but also towards the EU member states, their officials and the public. A joint platform on cooperation and coordination in this regard should be created.

Several MPs also agreed that there should be a better exchange on matters related to the EU integration process among the MPs in the region, as all Western Balkan states aspire to become EU members. This should not be just limited to communication, but should also include building a platform for cooperation that would result in practical outcomes, especially when it comes to issues such as regional cooperation in areas of economy and security.

An MP from Serbia suggested that MPs should also focus more on the Berlin Process and its outcomes. She suggested that the MPs should meet with representatives of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, which was established by the Western Balkans Six through the Berlin Process. In a direct exchange with them, the MPs can get first-hand information about cooperation, issues, challenges, and benefits of the established regional cooperation at this level. Also, this could produce a good pitch and inspiration for the establishment of new avenues of cooperation in the region, but also between MPs.

Another MP stressed that the countries should use any opportunity provided by the EU. However, there was an apparent disagreement about the usefulness of the “Mini Schengen” initiative. Apart from labeling it as a political project of leading politicians of some countries, some MPs said that it is working strictly for the benefit of the countries that have more or less equal level of development, primarily Serbia and Albania. Another pointed out that it will be absorbed through the recently created Regional Common Market anyway. Others said that it is the only initiative that has caught some traction, and that all other Western Balkans states should join it.

MPs from Kosovo and North Macedonia also stressed the importance of the issue of environment. Capitals of the Western Balkans states are among the most polluted in the world. “The pollution problem is urgent.” Parliaments should discuss this, and MPs should be more

engaged. Youth in the region are not leaving just because of low wages. The more pressing issue for them is the overall lack of perspective, and issues of pollution and environment are giving credibility to this perception.

Participants

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