

Advancing the Berlin Process Agenda

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) reconvened on December 21, 2020, its regional roundtable for senior political party officials from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Guest experts took part in the discussion as well. The discussion was devoted to the future of the Berlin Process agenda, offering an opportunity to the Western Balkans political representatives to discuss how to coordinate their country approaches, highlight 2021 regional priorities that could be addressed by the Berlin Process as well as to provide Germany with their ideas for improving the effectiveness of the process. This is the sixth roundtable discussion of the project supported by the German Federal Foreign Office.

The participants said that the overall progress of the Berlin Process launched in 2014 should be applauded. The agreement on traveling through the region only with ID cards, the green agenda, the regional roaming agreement, digital summits, assistance to the connectivity agenda, the small arms initiative, and a few other ongoing projects are significant achievements. The participants acknowledged that there have also been a number of obstacles in the implementation of the Berlin Process initiatives. A number of ambitious goals were set at the outset of the Process. Significant tangible progress has been reached on the issues related to connectivity and regional economic cooperation that is set to culminate in the recently announced creation of the Regional Common Market. A number of other original goals saw limited progress, a few participants noted, such as resolution of bilateral issues, strengthening of democracy, rule of law, and the freedom of media. These participants pointed out at the backsliding of democracy in a number of countries of the region, reduction in media freedom, increase of hate speech, and slow speed in overcoming the legacy of the past. To eliminate some of the obstacles and achieve progress on these critical goals, the region needs to develop a joint approach and a set of common priorities. More pressure and greater commitment from key EU capitals is needed as well. This is certainly not easy under the circumstances. The Coronavirus pandemic has added difficulties to reaching the Berlin Process's main goal to transform the region and to facilitate its EU accession process. The participants concluded that regional cooperation on economy, health, and rule of law should be prioritized by both the region and the Berlin Process.

The report is based on the roundtable discussions held under the Chatham House Rule of non-attribution. CIG's Associate in Kosovo Jeta Loshaj prepared the report. The participants took part in the discussion 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.

Conclusions and recommendations

The following conclusions, recommendations, and lessons learned about the past and ongoing initiatives of the Berlin Process came out of the discussions.

- A common goal of all actors—EU and regional—should be to build on the existing initiatives by working with parties that have been part of the process from the beginning, including chambers of commerce and civil society.
- Cooperation between the region's ministries of health during the Covid-19 pandemic is a good example of collaboration that could be replicated in other areas. A follow-up coordinated step would be to secure sufficient anti-Covid-19 vaccines for the region, a step needing both regional coordination and EU assistance.
- The pandemic highlighted the reliance of many processes on digitalization. The Berlin Process could focus on strengthening digitalization as part of the future cooperation platform. This would contribute to addressing connectivity as a priority of the Berlin Process.
- The Berlin Process should aim for initiatives that are not prone to having political objections, such as, the roaming agreement. A similar approach could be applied to mutual recognition of diplomas, certificates, and 'health passports.'
- Civil society, think tanks, initiatives on vocational education, and Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) should become an important component of the summit that is to take place in Berlin in 2021.
- The Berlin Process should not become (or be perceived as) a substitute for the EU accession process, but instead complement it.
- The Berlin Process should focus more on rule of law and democratic development, which are unambiguous prerequisites for economic development and EU membership. Human rights should also be addressed through a document where the regional countries commit to address human rights issues. The document could be drafted by the region's parliamentarians, civil society organizations, and representatives of the Berlin Process.
- The Berlin Process should help other regional organizations and initiatives in promoting regional cooperation. With good cooperation, the region would look different by 2024. The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) is working on four agreements to be completed by June 2021: (1) travel in the region with IDs only; (2) mutual recognition of diplomas of three professions: medical doctors, dentists, and architects; (3) an agreement on recognition of academic qualifications; (4) help tourism recover from the consequences of Covid-19 by collective visa recognition—a foreign tourist with a visa from one of the six Western Balkan countries can travel in the whole region.

- Bilateral disputes can be put aside if the region focuses on socio-economic cooperation, as in the case with the co-chairmanship of Bulgaria and North Macedonia.

The Berlin Process has boosted cooperation in the region, facilitating cooperation on the economy, connectivity, and promoting the regional common market. Some participants preferred short-term rather than long-term initiatives, because, especially at the time of the pandemic, the governments realized they need to learn how to respond to emergencies. The Western Balkans must learn how to work on not letting itself be perceived as a region of problems, but instead as a region attractive for investment and cooperation. The path to this transformation would be something the Berlin Process could support.

Participants

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Natasa Gacesa, International Secretary, Socialist Party of Serbia

Shpetim Gashi, Vice President, Council for Inclusive Governance

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Bojan Marichikj, Minister of Justice of North Macedonia

Vesna Markovic, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Serbian Progressive Party

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

Srdjan Mazalica, Member of Parliament of Republika Srpska, League of Independent Social Democrats (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Pierre Mirel, Honorary Director General, European Commission; Member, Board of Directors, Council for Inclusive Governance

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