

## Regional Cooperation on Pandemic Management and Economic Recovery

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) convened its seventh regional roundtable via teleconference on May 18, 2021 for senior political party officials from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Representatives of the German Federal Foreign Office and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) also took part. The roundtable is part of a CIG initiative on regional cooperation and democratic development in the Western Balkans supported by and implemented in cooperation with the German Federal Foreign Office.

The meeting focused on health and economic regional cooperation. Participants offered suggestions and recommendation to address the COVID-19 effects and speed up the recovery. CIG and the German Federal Foreign Office plan to convene an in-person meeting in July. A particular focus was given to the Berlin Process and how the CIG initiative could advance its objectives. The Berlin Process supports regional cooperation and helps the countries to prepare for EU accession. The Process is not a substitute for the EU membership, as some fear.

Recent agreements on the charge-free regional roaming and ID card only travel within the Western Balkans are just first steps in deepening regional cooperation. More agreements, such as on recognition of diplomas, will follow. The Process also helps to align the region with the EU standards. Regional initiatives such as the Green Agenda will help in the fight against climate change and in economic development based on green technology. The World Bank estimates that a common regional market would bring an additional 3.5 billion euro to the region, a speaker reported.

### Conclusions and Next Steps

- Participants agreed that the Berlin Process should be intensified and expanded in many areas. The Process will improve prospects of all countries for the EU integration. This mechanism should be utilized for advancing regional cooperation by making borders less visible and enhancing the cooperation between the region and the EU. The Process is also a must for maintaining the regional positive dynamics and particularly for addressing challenges such as the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, internal disputes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other bilateral disputes. “This forum, improved and intensified, is the best answer to non-papers and other strange ideas.”
- Participants discussed several bilateral issues, particularly the blockade of North Macedonia and Albania to open their negotiations with the EU. Lack of outcome in the Joint History Commission’s work between North Macedonia and Bulgaria is the major stumbling block. The EU experience is that the work of such commissions usually does not bring quick results. It took eight years for a similar commission founded by the Czech Republic and Slovakia to produce results. Hence, alternative paths should be found for such bilateral disputes, and the Berlin Process and other regional initiatives could prove to be instrumental in that regard.

- Besides improving the regional connectivity and cooperation, the Berlin Process is key to implementing the Green Agenda and approximation of the region to the goals of the EU Green Deal. Without a profound change in this area, the region could face dire consequences in many aspects, most notably in the non-competitiveness of their economies globally and in Europe.
- The region should utilize the Berlin Process to create a regional front towards the EU and find ways to present itself jointly to the EU. It should be used for more open and frank debate with all stakeholders and directly address the enlargement fatigue in candidate countries and EU member states.
- A participant outlined that for improved regional cooperation, each of the countries in the region should identify the obstacles they are facing and then define an agenda for overcoming them. “Maybe we will be surprised to see that there are similar types of obstacles that we can overcome together.” Then the countries could form a joint agenda for dealing with them.
- The pandemic provided challenges but also unprecedented regional cooperation examples that offered an insight that the countries in the region can put aside the systemic differences in a moment of need. These examples should be debated and used as the basis for developing cooperation in other fields.
- A participant from Bosnia proposed forming a new political mechanism that would gather the representatives of the parliaments in the region. Similar mechanism, such as the Parliamentary Forum, exists in Bosnia and Hercegovina that gathers representatives of all the state and entity parliament and the assembly of the Brcko District. This Forum could establish direct cooperation with the European Parliament and bring new energy into the debate about the EU integration of the region. It could contribute to the new plan for integration and be used to exchange ideas and information.
- Several participants stressed that since the region is not a priority for the EU, the region should better utilize regional initiatives like Mini-Schengen “to bridge the gap” caused by the slow pace of the enlargement. One participant proposed cooperation of this informal group with the Regional Youth Cooperation Office in Tirana.

## Participants

**Gresa Baftiu**, Associate, Council for Inclusive Governance

**Natasa Gacesa**, International Secretary, Socialist Party of Serbia

**Shpetim Gashi**, Vice President, Council for Inclusive Governance

**Ardian Gjini**, Deputy Chairman, Alliance for the Future of Kosovo; Mayor of Gjakova

**Christiane Hullmann**, Head of Division, Western Balkans, German Federal Foreign Office

**Bojan Marichikj**, Member, Social Democratic Union of Macedonia; Minister of Justice of North Macedonia

**Vesna Markovic**, Member, Main Board, Serbian Progressive Party; Deputy Chairman, Foreign Affairs Committee, Parliament of Serbia

**Srdjan Mazalica**, Member, Main Board, Alliance of Independent Social Democrats; Member, Parliament of Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Hercegovina)

**Tanja Miscevic**, Deputy Secretary General, Regional Cooperation Council

**Shqipe Mjekiqi**, Vice President, Democratic League of Kosovo

**Timco Mucunski**, International Secretary, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity; Member, Parliament of North Macedonia

**Igor Novakovic**, Associate, Council for Inclusive Governance

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

**Alex Roinishvili Grigorev**, President, Council for Inclusive Governance

**Nemanja Starovic**, Member, Main Board, Serbian Progressive Party; State Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia

**Ivan Vujovic**, Vice President, Social Democratic Party of Montenegro