

The Berlin Process and Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized on July 10, 2021, in Tirana, Albania, a roundtable for senior representatives of main political parties from the Western Balkans to discuss the future of the Berlin Process. Launched in 2014 by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the Process aimed to step up regional cooperation and the region’s integration into the EU. The last summit of the seven-year long initiative was held on July 2021. Though no decision about its future has been taken yet, the summit participants stressed the need for its continuation “to harness the full potential of improved regional cooperation.” The participants in the Tirana roundtable said that the continuation of the process should be tailored to the new circumstances in the region. Participants familiar with EU policies said the region remains high on the EU agenda, but many Western Balkan representatives were skeptical. The region, however, should show more “willingness and ability” to resolve the many basic bilateral and internal issues before “the EU takes it more seriously.”

The recommendations are based on the discussion as a whole and do not necessarily reflect the views of individual participants, CIG, or the German Federal Foreign Office, which supports the initiative. CIG’s vice president Shpetim Gashi prepared the report and CIG takes the responsibility for its content.

Recommendations

1. An eventual continuation of the Berlin Process should grant more ownership to the Western Balkan countries, which in turn should show more commitment and accountability in addressing their bilateral disputes and stepping up regional economic and political cooperation.
2. The EU and the Western Balkan countries should urgently address EU’s “reluctance” to speed up the enlargement process in the Balkans. The aim of such “consultation” should be to encourage the EU to reenergize its commitment for membership for the region and for the Western Balkan countries to step up their efforts to resolve their bilateral disputes, implement internal democratic reforms, and improve regional cooperation and thus bring the region “closer to EU’s democratic standards.”
3. The region’s leaders should agree on a set of clear principles to regional cooperation and on a path to EU membership. The Western Balkan countries also need to show more leadership and political will to reach and implement agreements at the regional level. Efforts to reach agreements on four topics—abolishing visas between Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, recognition of academic qualification, recognition of university diplomas, and visa recognition for third country citizens for travel through the region—within the Berlin Process failed to be concluded mostly because of symbolic issues, primarily between Pristina and Belgrade. At the same time, the EU should become stricter with the region’s leaderships, not allowing them to change the “basic principles of cooperation” whenever it suits them.

4. The Berlin Process and other regional initiatives, such as the Sarajevo-based Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), do not aim to replace the EU enlargement process but rather to complement and accelerate it. The EU together with the Western Balkan countries should define the challenges to EU membership and work more with the skeptical EU member states. The EU should also see if it is possible to become more flexible with some enlargement conditions, which countries, particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina, do not have the capacity to fulfill. The EU should also keep an eye on the influence of other, “not so benign external actors” who are trying to take advantage of EU’s perceived weakness in the region and establish their influence in this tiny but strategic backyard of Europe. Given all these challenges, a stronger Berlin Process is now needed more than ever.
5. The EU leadership should not allow “petty bilateral issues and dubious concerns” of some of its members to obstruct the region’s integration. The EU should open the negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia and grant visa liberalization to Kosovo without further delay. In turn, the Western Balkan countries should themselves not use “petty bilateral issues and excuses” to delay the resolution of their own problems and impede “each other’s path to the EU integration.”
6. The Western Balkan countries should address EU’s fear of potentially having “six more Orbans in the Union.” Democratic transformation in the region should be real. The EU will not be cheated with façade reforms. The EU and the region should agree that the “you deliver, we deliver” principle guides their relationship and the integration path and both sides commit to hold their side of the bargain.
7. The Western Balkan countries need to address the root causes of their disputes and distrust.
8. The EU and the Western Balkan countries should establish a joint regional agenda with clear objectives and timeframes. Perhaps the summits should be less ambitious but should take place as often as every quarter.

Expanded discussion

1. An eventual continuation of the Berlin Process should grant more ownership to the region and encourage it to address its own challenges more effectively and efficiently. The seven-year long Berlin Process covered a broad range of issues, including youth, civil society, and supported many aspects of regional cooperation. The process offered equal treatment to all its Western Balkan participants. Some progress was made on a range of issues, but not as much as the initiative had intended. The Western Balkan countries agreed on some loosely defined basic principles of a common regional market but more work needs to be done to make it happen. The four agreements on a) abolishing visas between Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, b) recognition of academic qualification, c) recognition of university diplomas, and d) mutual recognition of visas issued to third country citizens are not yet ready yet for signature, mostly because of disputes between Serbia and Kosovo. The RCC facilitated negotiations on these four issues. The upcoming October summit in Slovenia could push for the signing of these four draft agreements. The RCC is also working to establish research centers in universities in the region but the project is rather expensive and financial support from the EU Commission seems to be necessary. This research initiative would offer grants to over 200 institutions. Whatever the future of the Berlin Process, Germany will continue to support the region and encourage it to become more ambitious in its goals and more determined in policy implementation. The model for continuation of the Berlin Process has not been decided yet, but there were some suggestions that the EU Commission should get more

engaged in the region. Some participants thought that a US involvement would be beneficial as well.

2. The EU together with the Balkan countries should address EU's concerns about further enlargement. In the meantime, North Macedonia and Albania should open the negotiations as soon as possible. The EU should do more to convince its members not to block the process. The EU could also help the region with increasing its technical capacities. Regional deals, such as the roaming agreement, were considered to benefit all, but the region seems to have insufficient capacities to implement it. The other four agreements have stalled mostly because of political reasons but also for technical issues, especially the agreement on visas for third party citizens. There is a lot of political will for regional cooperation but bilateral disputes such as the one between Pristina and Belgrade are stalling the process. The problems between Belgrade and Pristina on the four agreements were more with wording—whether to use 'country' or 'economy,' 'people' or 'citizens'—than with substance. For the ID card travel agreement, the problem was largely political while for the academic qualifications agreement (expected to include nine professions) it was mostly technical. The Green Lanes is another useful project. It was quite successful for transportation of food and medicine during the pandemic. Green lanes should operate in the post-pandemic as well. The Berlin Process triggered a lot of communication in the region and offered synergies to regional initiatives such as CEFTA and RCC. And the Tirana-based RYCO facilitated communication and cooperation among the youth through various regional and in-country projects.
3. The current approach to regional cooperation is not productive enough. Though there are some technical problems, the lack of cooperation is largely because of insufficient political will. Some states and other actors, such as businesses and universities, could be afraid of competition and mobility, but these concerns could be addressed together. A joint regional project could be an investment plan aiming to attract large companies to invest in the region. The Berlin Process could help in this regard. The region believed in the Process because Angela Merkel was behind it. A strong leader or a group of leaders should also be behind the new stage of the process. Many suggested that the new process should have a more ambitious agenda and a better bargaining mechanism for reaching agreements.
4. Some in the Western Balkans fear the Berlin Process aims to replace the EU enlargement process. Such doubts need to be clarified. The Berlin Process only aims to facilitate regional cooperation and by extension accelerate enlargement. Some said the region's "integration" into the EU is inevitable. "We will end up in the EU one way or another, either as workers or as EU citizens." Half of Bosnia and Herzegovina's citizens, for instance, already have EU passports. About 30,000 people leave Serbia annually. Numbers are just as high in other Balkan countries. Many speakers recognized that the Western Balkan countries are not doing their homework, but "neither does the EU." The EU is not doing enough to "convince Bulgaria not to block North Macedonia." A speaker said the EU should become more lenient with "meeting the standards." Some of the fourteen conditions for Bosnia and Herzegovina for candidate status are "impossible to fulfill." Delaying integration has a cost both for the Western Balkans and for the EU. It allows other foreign actors to "meddle into EU's backyard." The EU should pay more attention to "geopolitics and less to bureaucracy." Some said the region should also think what "it has to offer to the EU," not only "demand things from the EU." The EU seems to fear further "Orbanization of the Union" and so is reluctant to accept "six more Orbans in the Union." The Western Balkans leaderships should address this EU concern.
5. The EU should find ways to convince its members not to use their bilateral issues to hamper the Union's enlargement process. Including resolution of bilateral issues as a precondition to membership was perhaps a mistake as any member can block a candidate indefinitely by

insisting on insignificant or even artificial issues. The EU should convince Bulgaria to address bilateral issues in a more constructive manner, “without threats and blockages.” Otherwise, such “petty bilateral issues could seriously undermine the region’s commitment for EU integration.” The dispute between Bulgaria and North Macedonia looks like a “competition between the EU and the Western Balkans over who is more reckless.” Bulgaria is putting North Macedonia in an impossible position and setting a dangerous precedent for future EU processes. North Macedonia agreed to a Portuguese compromise proposal but Bulgaria rejected it. Some suspected Bulgaria might be used as a proxy by another country to block the region’s integration process. A speaker said Greece had warned North Macedonia years ago that Greece is not the main obstacle to the country’s EU integration. “Some others are.” Some said this is also harming EU’s credibility. It is better for the EU to tell the region that, “we do not want new members for now” than to continue to use “petty excuses such as history and language” to delay the integration.” The EU process is becoming more about “pleasing the region’s neighbors than helping the six Balkan countries.” As such it is more about petty issues than the fundamentals. It is a crucial juncture for the EU to decide what it wants to do with the region. North Macedonia cannot defend EU’s position before its citizens for too long. Many in the Western Balkans do understand EU’s concern about “more Orbans in the Union,” but then the EU should be frank and say, “this is the main reason for the delay.” Another non-productive EU policy is quietly “making visa liberalization for Kosovo part of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue.” The dialogue might take years and connecting visa liberalization with the dialogue is an “unfair policy.” An eventual continuation of the Berlin Process should help harmonize the region’s interests and objectives instead of just “babysitting the conflicts in the region.”

6. The Berlin Process aimed to help resolve the region’s problems and thus ease its path to full EU membership. The dispute between Bulgaria and North Macedonia is a big test for the EU. Many in the region wonder how come such a “giant superpower that helps resolve even global issues cannot address this trivial internal issue.” Though the EU is rightly afraid of “six more Orbans,” it should have a more constructive approach to the region. The EU should definitely not accept “façade reforms,” but at the same time “it should not become a partner with the leaders that impeded the reforms.” The Western Balkan countries need to do more to convince the EU that their reforms are real and that they intend to join the EU as real democracies. They could do this by strengthening rule of law, fighting corruption and organized crime, allowing freedom of the media, and implementing faster the requirements for the EU membership. The EU and the region could set up a joint mechanism to monitor the implementation of such policies. The “we deliver, you deliver,” principle should be applied. North Macedonia delivered on the candidate status and now it is EU’s turn to reciprocate. Kosovo delivered on the visa liberalization and now it is EU’s turn to deliver. A speaker suggested that Kosovo should open “bilateral dialogues and offer bilateral assurances” to the concerned countries, primarily to France and Holland. A speaker said that the EU will continue to support the region’s integration, but it will also continue to ask the countries in the region to do their homework “just as is expected from a future EU member.”
7. Distrust in the region remains a “spoiler of cooperation.” The countries do not trust each other’s intentions. The leaders’ focus on winning elections again and again is “blinding their long-term visions and responsibilities for resolving problems.” The Balkan leaders need to recognize that decision-making in the EU is already rather complex and one should ask why the EU would want to make it even more complex with new “distrustful members.” The Western Balkan leaders should ask themselves what does the region have to offer to the EU, what is its added value. Their economies are peanuts for the EU. Their democracies are weak. The EU

cannot be cheated. The first thing is to recognize what the region is facing and second to begin to look for sustainable solutions to the problems it faces. Serbia and Kosovo should once and for all conclude their conflict. Others should also find solutions to their bilateral issues. Once the region resolves its problems, it will become more attractive for the EU.

8. The EU and the region should establish a joint regional agenda. Germany could help a lot, as it knows best from its unification experience what it takes for a transition to be successful. “It made East Germany an EU country in record time.” The joint agenda could be based on the existing goals and initiatives, but also introduce new initiatives and topics, such as rule of law and corruption.

Milestones for 2021-2024

The following list includes a number of eventual achievements that the participants said are possible within the next three years.

1. Create 12,000 internships in public and private institutions equally divided in the six countries.
2. Full cooperation among the chambers of commerce.
3. Agreement on a common regional market.
4. Full implementation of the roaming agreement.
5. A peace agreement between Kosovo and Serbia.
6. Joint sizeable youth events in a different country of the region every two months.
7. Free movement of people.
8. Establishment of an Erasmus program for the Western Balkans.
9. Recognition of university diplomas and other professional qualifications.
10. Agreement on green lanes.
11. Establishment of a regional judicial academy.
12. Agreement to a joint tribute to victims of recent wars in the region and progress on RECOM.
13. Cooperation on reduction of air pollution.
14. Increasing substantially tourism in the region and establish a joint regional cultural and tourist institution.
15. Establish an open data regional hub.
16. A joint regional energy strategy.
17. Ecological cooperation.
18. Low-cost flights in the region.
19. Visa liberalization for Kosovo.
20. Opening of and progress in the EU negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. All Western Balkan six are on a clear EU path by 2024.
21. Establishment of a regional policy analysis center.
22. Visa free travel between Kosovo and Bosnia.
23. ID-only travel within the region for its inhabitants.
24. Adoption of a region-wide strategy on human rights.
25. Cross-border/boundary cooperation between municipalities in Serbia and Kosovo.

In conclusion, the participants agreed that the Berlin Process helped to understand the complexity and dimensions of the region’s internal and external challenges. Second, it illustrated how interdependent the region is, as the case of North Macedonia and Albania illustrates. This interdependence could work as an incentive to work with and help each other. The participants

recognized the important role of the EU and that EU membership has no alternative. The region recognizes and understands what it takes to resolve its regional disputes. Now it is time it also agrees on a list of joint steps to resolve the problems. Sidestepping them no longer works. There was consensus that the Berlin Process should continue to serve as a mechanism to facilitate the resolution of the region's disputes and complement EU's enlargement process.

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