

Political Parties Support Regional Cooperation

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized another roundtable for senior officials of main political parties from the Western Balkans, both government and opposition, in Budva, Montenegro, on December 11, 2021 to discuss regional economic cooperation. The participants recommended that the Western Balkan countries should jointly shape the ongoing regional initiatives to make them as inclusive and effective as possible. The roundtable was part of a CIG-facilitated initiative on regional cooperation supported by the German Federal Foreign Office. The report does not necessarily represent the views of individual participants or those of CIG but rather reflects the discussion as a whole.

The report recommendations are based on the roundtable discussions. The participants recommended better coordination among the countries, swift addressing of concerns of some countries about regional initiatives, more targeted and specific cooperation between the EU and the region, and the signing and implementation of the four almost-ready the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)-facilitated agreements.

- 1. Coordinate regional economic cooperation initiatives.** The Western Balkan countries and the international stakeholders should have a series of consultations on coordinating and perhaps unifying the objectives of the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans initiatives. The EU should offer more clarity about the perceived negative connection between the EU enlargement and the Berlin Process, that the Berlin Process is there to replace somehow the enlargement. The EU should explain as often as possible that the aim of the initiative is instead to accelerate enlargement. The Berlin Process and the Open Balkans should complement each other and gradually aim to converge into one inclusive initiative the main objective of which would be a regional common market. The Berlin Process is “fully regional” but its future is uncertain, while the Open Balkans is more dynamic but is only “half regional.” A combination of inclusivity and dynamism could accelerate regional cooperation. Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia believe that the EU integration is too slow and therefore are trying to do something on their own through this “trilateral initiative.” The weakness of the Open Balkans is that it is not regional. The EU should see whether to continue with what some leaders in the region perceive as a “weak process” or come up with something stronger, more result-oriented and that is more specifically and visibly connected to the EU enlargement. In conclusion, the EU, the US, and the Balkan countries should sit together and agree on a unified and coordinated course of action that leads to a common regional market. The US and Germany could help “marry the objectives of the Open Balkans and the Berlin Process.”
- 2. Address the concerns of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro.** How to address these countries’ concerns about the Open Balkans initiative? The main dispute is between Kosovo and Serbia. Kosovo claims it is not treated equally. Though the three Open Balkans members say all current and future members will be treated equally, they recognize that Kosovo may be “equal but different.” They call on Kosovo to be “more flexible with its name,” expecting Kosovo to use the asterisk and the footnote in line with the agreement reached in

Brussels in 2013. Pristina says this is out of the question. Tirana and Skopje publicly stay away from this Pristina-Belgrade debate. Unlike the Open Balkans, the Berlin Process does not require the use of the asterisk for Kosovo, treating it equally with the other members. Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia should sit together with Kosovo and address these “inequality issues.” If Serbia insists on the asterisk, Kosovo will most likely not join the Open Balkans. In this case, Albania and North Macedonia should mediate discussions on an acceptable model between Belgrade and Pristina. Montenegro also opposes the Open Balkans, but its stance is less strict. It is in some kind of “wait and see position.” Montenegro’s previous government was concerned that the Open Balkans would slow down its EU integration process and that Serbia would dominate the initiative. The current government’s position seems to be shifting in favor of joining it but given the government’s fragility, the country is not likely to make a decision soon. Bosnia and Herzegovina does not favor the Open Balkans either, largely because “Sarajevo distrusts Belgrade” and believes “Serbia would dominate the initiative.” Therefore, Sarajevo, Pristina, and Podgorica would continue to believe that only “the EU is credible enough to lead an inclusive regional initiative.” All stakeholders should show flexibility and pragmatism in addressing these concerns and not let such trivial issues be in the way of regional cooperation.

3. **The EU should step its enlargement efforts.** The EU should deliver on its promises: grant Kosovo visa liberalization and open membership negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia as soon as possible. The EU should coordinate with its members, so that they do not use bilateral issues to block aspiring candidates, such as Bulgaria blocking North Macedonia over rather petty issues. Similar problems are expected in the future: Croatia might use bilateral issues to block both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The EU should try exclude bilateral issues from the enlargement process. In the meantime, the EU should consider a “membership minus” approach for the six Balkan countries as a transitional phase towards full membership by granting them access to EU’s common market. Reforms and criteria are important but the EU should also see the region also as a “security interest.” Therefore, the enlargement should not exclusively be based on reforms and criteria but also on EU’s geostrategic interests. Integration of the Western Balkans is a mutual interest. The EU benefits just as much as the Western Balkans. Therefore, the EU integration should be driven by geostrategic interests just as much as by reforms.
4. **The region should step up its conflict-resolution and rule of law efforts.** The region has a weak capacity to reform. It faces many ongoing ethnic and political crises. Bold steps are needed to neutralize some of the ethnic issues and dilute internal political polarization, ultimately reducing “the appetite for crisis.” The region should also step up its rule of law efforts. The international community could help. Recent US sanctions on corrupt individuals and politicians are a good step in a right direction. The EU should impose its own sanctions. Just supporting the US sanctions is not enough. However, such targeted punitive actions should be balanced and well-communicated, as using sanctions as a political tool can sometime backfire. The sanctions will have different effects in different countries. In Kosovo and Albania, sanctions against political leaders could end their careers, but in Bosnia and Herzegovina could make the leaders even more popular among their constituencies. If done correctly and decisively though, the sanctions could give “a rule-of-law and democratic boost to the region.”

- 5. Conclude the four regional agreements.** The four RCC-facilitated agreements are ready to be signed but are delayed for political reasons. The Western Balkan countries should address the remaining hurdles and sign and implement the four agreements as soon as possible.

Reforms and enlargement have no alternative

There are some good prospects for the region. A new Bulgarian government could make some progress on resolving the dispute with North Macedonia. French President Emmanuel Macron will host a Balkan summit in June 2022, and it is good that it will take place in France, as it is perceived as a member state that does not support enlargement at this time. The Berlin Process will continue but its shape depends on the new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. The Berlin Process is not mentioned in the German governing coalition agreement, but the candidacy status for Western Balkan countries and continuation of the enlargement are. The Berlin Process will remain inclusive with all “six countries as equal partners. “All actors have similar agendas for the regional cooperation in terms of deliverables and the regional market. So even though there are a number of initiatives, the agenda is the same. Even the same people work on all of them.

North Macedonia supports the Open Balkans. Allegations that the initiative is an alternative to the EU integration are unfounded. The initiative is not in contradiction with the Berlin Process either; it only complements it. Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia have established country-based internal secretariats and a regional secretariat, employing full time experts to work on specific issues. North Macedonia also has indications that “the US is interested to support the initiative.” A speaker said that Montenegro is expected to join soon, and that the current three members should do more to “convince Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.” A speaker reported that Kosovo’s officials are not interested in the initiative because “the Open Balkans makes the region vulnerable to China and others.” In addition, Kosovo argues it is not treated equally, claiming it is asked to use the asterisk next to its name. “You will not see Kosovo with an asterisk in any initiative.”

A speaker suggested the RCC become an “implementing partner” or “an agency” that “coordinates and streamlines all regional ideas.” Another speaker argued that the Open Balkans is compatible with other initiatives, such as the green agenda. The speaker was not optimistic that the Berlin Process’s Common Regional Market would succeed, but believed the Open Balkans would promote cooperation in the region. North Macedonia and Serbia are a “one-stop shop now,” limiting truck waiting time in borders by 70 percent. The Open Balkans is “inclusive for those who want to join.” A speaker said that the Open Balkans would eliminate the visa regime between Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, encouraging both to join. The speaker concluded that the parties should agree on a joint course of action: it is not important whether it is Common Regional Market, Berlin Process 2.0, or Open Balkans, what is important is that “it works for the whole region.”

Bilateral disputes between Serbia and Kosovo are reflected in the regional cooperation, said a speaker, adding that “the process should stand on inclusivity and equality” for it to be successful. As long as Kosovo is not treated equally, it is not likely to join regional efforts. “The Open Balkans has a trust and credibility issue.” Kosovo has a number of unresolved disputes also with Bosnia and Herzegovina, which apply visas to each other. A speaker explained that Kosovo wants to move the regional cooperation forward, but only as equals. “When Serbia doesn’t recognize Kosovo’s documents of origin, how can we talk about free trade!” Bosnia and Herzegovina has in addition

a number of internal problems. “It is difficult to talk about regional cooperation when the country’s constitution is under attack.”

Inclusivity is important but it could become a liability when parties have disputes, as reflected in the failure to achieve the four agreements. A speaker was optimistic that Montenegro would join the Open Balkans soon and “Kosovo may join too in the end, but when you’re last to join, you don’t negotiate, you just accept the already agreed principles and norms.” The reasons for disagreement and confusion over the regional initiatives are because there is confusion about enlargement. “We need a new beginning in the enlargement process.” A new beginning means visa liberalization for Kosovo and opening the negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. The problem with the EU is that it does not speak with the same voice. “When you talk to 28 members, you often get 28 different answers.” Some speakers were optimistic that “the EU will take care of its backyard.”

The participants articulated a number of suggestions and conclusions for regional cooperation.

- The Open Balkans is a voluntary regional initiative, owned by the region. The three countries aim to make it a legally-binding deal. It is also an effort to see what the region can do about itself without always relying in the international support. The idea was borne out in 2019 when “the EU told the three leaders at a dinner that the EU integration was not going to move fast.” The idea was borne out of frustration. The initiative is open to all members. Some agreements have already been reached, such as on the ID card travel. The ultimate goal of the initiative is economic growth.
- The terms of the Open Balkans are ‘different but equal.’ The rights and responsibilities are the equal, but the denomination is different for some. In other words, Serbia will insist that Kosovo must use the asterisk. The decisions in the Open Balkans are based on consensus for now. The three countries go ahead only with ideas that are acceptable to all three. There is no outside referee. The Open Balkans is not an international organization; it consists of agreements and each agreement has mechanisms to address eventual disputes. It is an ongoing process. It recently established a number of implementing groups.
- The Berlin Process and the Open Balkans should find ways to complement each other. They have similar goals.
- The US and the EU should agree on a joint course of action regarding the regional cooperation. While Germany favors the Berlin Process, the US does not seem to have a preference.
- The Common Regional Market is also owned by Balkan leaders. All six endorsed it.

In conclusion, there was consensus that the EU helped regional cooperation on a number of areas through the Berlin Process, such as the roaming agreement, the connectivity agenda, and the peace highway. The legacy of the past remains a stubborn obstacle. The EU reluctance for enlargement is also visible. Though Albania’s and North Macedonia’s frustrations are understandable, it is not a wise policy to say “let’s drop all the reforms and take the money from the likes of Russia and China.” The speakers concluded that the reforms should continue regardless of the pace of the EU integration process.

Participants

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Simonida Kordic, Chair, Constitutional Committee, Parliament of Montenegro; Member, Presidency, New Serbian Democracy

Mimoza Kusari Lila, Head, Parliamentary Group of the Self-Determination Movement, Parliament of Kosovo

Srecko Latal, Analyst, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Vesna Markovic, Member, Main Board, Serbian Progressive Party; Deputy Chair, Foreign Relations Committee, Parliament of Serbia

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

Senida Mesi, Former Deputy Prime Minister of Albania, Socialist Party

Tanja Miscevic, Deputy Secretary General, Regional Cooperation Council

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Zoran Popov, Member, Main Board, Social Democratic Union of Macedonia; State Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia

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