

Creating a Western Balkans Joint Regional Approach in Fighting COVID-19

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) convened its fourth regional roundtable for senior political party officials from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The Deputy Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council took part as a special guest. The meeting took place on August 6, 2020 via teleconference. Following up on the last meeting, held in late June, and written exchanges in July, the group discussed concrete steps to create a joint regional approach in fighting COVID-19.

The roundtable is part of a CIG initiative on regional cooperation and democratic development in the Western Balkans (WB6) supported by and implemented in cooperation with the German Federal Foreign Office. This report is based on the roundtable discussions held under the Chatham House Rule. The participants took part in the discussions 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.

The WB6 region is small and interconnected. The pandemic is not going away any time soon and the worst can be still ahead for the region. Creating a joint regional approach in fighting COVID-19 as soon as possible is critical. Given the diverse measures applied throughout the region, such an effort is understandably complicated but possible if the political will exists.. Currently, there is no such initiative. Many reasons for not instituting joint approaches are claimed in various elections that have been and are being held in the counties of the region during the pandemic. Although a few governments did show that it is possible to keep the borders open during this period. The pandemic should be a good reason to repair and improve bilateral relations in the region.

The situation is more or less the same for everyone in the region—all have similar life habits, move the most precisely in the neighboring countries within the region, share similar problems, and that if acting together the countries of the region can contribute to alleviate the crisis faster, better, cheaper, and hopefully with much less human and material loss. Accepting this fact alone already resolves quite a bit of the problem.

Some participants cautioned that if the initiatives are focused on producing common measures for the region, beyond coordination and consultation there would be problems as the legislation differs significantly in various countries preventing a successful synchronization. Perhaps starting modestly but aiming first and foremost at the implementation and producing tangible results is a better course of action. There are a vast number of regional initiatives but that the results are slim.

Conclusions and Next Steps

- The organizers of the next *Berlin Process Summit* in November 2020, North Macedonia and Bulgaria, should launch consultations with the WB6 governments to establish regional mechanisms for COVID-19-related cooperation. **Regular coordination between the WB6 prime ministers** is needed.
- **Regional operational mechanisms for exchanging the experience and coordination among the ministries of health** should be established immediately. COVID-19-related coordination should be held on weekly basis at expert level and once a month at the ministerial level. As a target, the ministries should aim at producing **a regional action plan** with concrete measures and steps for the implementation. Following this August 6th discussion through coordination of a North Macedonian participant, the Minister of Health of North Macedonia invited his WB6 counterparts to the initial meeting in the second part of August. Serbia, it was reported, has already expressed through coordination of a Serbian participant its own political will to participate in such a mechanism. Participants from other countries have committed to engage with their ministers of health to ensure participation.
- All national bodies dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic should coordinate their actions and at the very least establish a daily information sharing mechanism. Such bodies can form **a regional health council**.
- National COVID-19 **databases should be digitalized and connected**. All the COVID-19-related information and the statistics from each country should be exchanged.
- The WB6 countries could agree on **a unified model for COVID-19 statistics**.
- **Regular coordination among the ministries of internal affairs** is indispensable and should be organized within the Berlin Process. The proposed mechanism should consist of weekly meetings of experts and monthly meetings of ministers.
- The WB6 **ministries of education should exchange experience** especially on organizing the remote learning during the pandemic. All WB6 countries will face same challenges in all levels of education beginning September 1. Organizing childcare for essential and especially medical workers is another common challenge. A Serbian participant agreed to start coordination on this issue with his Minister of Education, Science and Technological Development. .
- An **exchange of best practices in the decision-making process** during the pandemic and especially lockdowns should be pursued, i.e. on the functioning of the parliaments and voting procedures. North Macedonia will soon receive a draft proposal for a new methodology for parliamentary work during the pandemic. They are prepared to share it with the other countries in the region and to **start a discussion on improving the effectiveness of the parliamentary work during the pandemic**.
- The next, fifth meeting of the roundtable in September will discuss **gender-related challenges in the pandemic** since women carry the heaviest burden having both to work from home and to take care of the children and homeschool them.
- All WB6 countries will benefit from a complete digitalization of databases and regional implementation of a smart city digital platform. The countries are too small to invest alone in such costly initiatives; therefore, the region should consider a regional cloud for the smart city implementation.
- **Securing the freedom of movement for persons and goods** is paramount. The “**green lanes**” **should be continued indefinitely and extended** to non-essential goods as well. The countries of the region should be open to each other. The current border restrictions are hampering the populations and the economies. The WB6 countries

should emulate the EU, which could be the best approach for the region—to *have open borders within the region, but restrictions on the high-risk countries outside the region.*

- With a *decisive role of the EU* and support by the Berlin Process establishing of such cooperation mechanisms will be more effective. The EU can provide a needed boost both within the EU and in the region. Establishing such regional cooperation would benefit not only the region but also the EU which is investing significant moneys in the region to fight the crisis.
- The EU is preparing a financial assistance package for fighting the COVID-19 for the Western Balkans. There will be funding for digital, environment, and infrastructure. *The WB6 countries should prepare joint projects.* Such initiative would be instrumental in utilizing the funds in the best way and to increase the absorption level.

Participants

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