



Democratic Development in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans is not immune to the challenges to democracy frequently appearing in the democratic world. However, the region's legacy of conflicts, specific political culture, and the influences from external authoritarian regimes exacerbate these tests. The EU integration process is the region's central beacon and the driver for democratization. But the blurred EU perspective is not helping. The primary responsibility for the continuous democratic development and protection of democratic standards is on the countries themselves. If there are positive signals from the region regarding the state of democracy and the rule of law, this could improve chances for the 2030 integration of the region into the EU. In addition to these challenges, parliaments are often not the critical institutions for the political debate and to check and balance the executives. Their role is crucial for improving the state of democracy in the region.

To address these issues, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG), in cooperation with the Federal Foreign Office of Germany (AA), organized on December 8, 2023, in Belgrade, Serbia, a roundtable for senior officials of the main political parties from the Western Balkans. The roundtable is part of a larger initiative to strengthen the region in the face of new geopolitical challenges conducted by CIG and supported by AA. The event discussed the internal challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Serbia-Kosovo dispute and how the region could help overcome these challenges. The discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule. CIG's Senior Associate Igor Novaković drafted this report. The report does not necessarily represent the views of individual participants, CIG, or AA. It instead reflects the discussion as a whole, and CIG is solely responsible for its content.

State of democracy in the region

The state of democracy is essential both for the opposition and the government. Politics in democratic societies is not a zero-sum game, and ruling parties can go to the opposition. When this happens, democratic standards ensure their survival on the political scene and participation in the political process. Though the region has made some democratic breakthroughs, its prospects for EU membership seem weak. "The EU sees bad news in the region," stressed a participant. "EU sees a rise in authoritarian trends and does not want, at present, to have the region in the club." The region is bursting with 'dirty money,' corruption is high, and though some media pluralism exists there is no pluralism of media narratives. And finally, the political culture is weak, as are the institutions. The level of polarization between the opposition and the ruling parties is enormous, hampering the political debate and reforms. However, some claimed that the good news is that the polarization is primarily personal and not ideological, as the current politicians do not stand for the different opinions. Thus, the authentic culture of dialogue is absent, and this is something that should be tackled.

The state of democracy is different in each of the countries, claimed a participant from Bosnia. He outlined that the elites cannot *control* or capture the key institutions, as the political system in the state is decentralized. “Thus, it is hard to have complete control, and there was a shift between the governing and opposition parties.” Others said that might be true, but now the key “institution” for state capturing is the media. “If the media are not reflecting pluralism and differences in opinion, there will be no change.” “Despite having one country, there are three media and political spaces in Bosnia: one in Banja Luka, one in Mostar, and one in Sarajevo,” claimed another participant from Bosnia. Thus, the institutional capture goes along ethnic lines and is not institutional.

A participant from Kosovo said that the current state of democracy in the region is a consequence of what happened in the past three decades. “We are having unfinished states, unfinished peace, and unfinished EU integration process.” “Nobody trusts in the 2030 promise, the EU lost all its credibility,” said a participant from North Macedonia. The recent blockades of North Macedonia by France and Bulgaria and the announcement of the blockade of Albania’s EU integration process by Greece sent an extremely negative signal to the societies and political elites. The speakers stressed that the EU integration processes are crucial for the state of democracy and democratic reforms, and without having clear roadmaps, they will not be able to do it. Another participant from Serbia outlined that the previous processes of enlargement have proved that the EU does not like to enlarge and that these processes happen only when the Union is under some internal or external threat.

The major problem with the EU integration process is that “the thrill is gone,” stressed a participant from Kosovo. In other words, despite the proclaimed readiness of the EU to push the enlargement process forward, rare are those in the region who now actually care because they do not believe in the process and its outcomes anymore. The participant proposed a need for a new “grand narrative that will unite us and push the processes.” Another participant from Kosovo stated that the EU is complicated and is far removed from regular citizens. “There has to be something more for the citizens, what would bring the EU closer.” A drop in roaming charges was a good step in that regard.

“We should think about rebranding the region; years of negative media coverage has destroyed the Western Balkans as a brand,” said a participant from Albania. The new name or brand could help us change the paradigm in the EU about the Western Balkans and possibly invent a new narrative for us that could be used as a driver for reforms. A speaker said that upon his arrival in Belgrade Airport, there was a giant billboard welcoming passengers by saying, “Welcome to Belgrade, the gate of Central Europe and the Balkans.” The participant concluded that this could be a basis of a new positive narrative. Brave political decisions are sometimes needed, and they could help significantly, said a participant from Serbia. “In Serbia, the issue of the EU was the driver of political polarization in the country until 2008.” Brave choices of some parties to go beyond their proclaimed ideologies open the doors for normalization, and later on some formerly anti-EU forces accept the EU as a goal.

Parliaments in the Western Balkans

There are several problems with the parliaments in the region. In most of the Western Balkans, parliaments are weak. Their primary function is voting for new legislation, while their role as a

place for political debate and the critical institution for checking the majority are highly toned down. All the issues related to the lack of democratic development in the region are best seen in the parliaments. The level of polarization is immense within the parliaments, hampering constructiveness of the political debate. Even the reforms that support the EU integration process and the image of the EU in the countries are sometimes not supported by the opposition parties for the mere reason that the ruling elites are pushing for them. “The opposition often sees everything from the government as problematic and challenging. The opposition even did not vote for the IPA-III-related legislation.”

A participant from Serbia suggested that the best would be to select a list of priorities for the country and, in particular, the EU integration process. “The priorities should be accepted by all parties who would pledge to support key reforms.” A participant from Kosovo said that the internationals should back the opposition parties in framing the narrative. He suggested that many existing programs that support development of political parties should prioritize it. A participant from Serbia said that the opposition parties that try to be more constructive cannot go too far, as there is an image that “it is treason to even sit with the government.” Hence, the pressure is high not to accept any compromise with the government. However, this is often created through the very way the ruling majority itself acts, which often targets the opposition through the pro-governmental media and various smear campaigns.

The citizens do not directly elect parliament members in most of the countries due to the electoral proportional system with closed lists (only Kosovo has an open list system), causing the quality of the ruling majority’s MPs to vary. They often have no real influence or say in the parties and are often directly controlled by the executives. Some participants have thus proposed the reform of the electoral systems to satisfy the need for citizens to have a say on who will enter the parliament and who will not. Many said party leaderships will resist opening the electoral lists.

The role that the speakers of the parliaments take is often challenging, as they are not even trying to be neutral but do everything in favor of the ruling majority. This should be corrected and speakers should realize the importance of the post they occupy for the normality of political dialogue and the democratic standards in the countries. Also speakers often call the sessions according to emergency procedures, which hampers the parliament’s normal functioning and decreases the freedom of the MPs, for example, for parliamentary diplomacy.

Some participants reminded that states like Canada and the UK have an institution of so-called opposition days. In other words, the opposition gets to set the agenda and run one whole session of the parliament on its own. “This allows the opposition parties to present their ideas more freely and to show what they are capable of but also it allows them to criticize the government and present alternatives more directly,” said one of the present MPs. Participants have also criticized that one of the key regional initiatives, the Berlin Process, does not fully recognize the importance of the parliaments. Parliaments or at least selected MPs (establishment of committees for regional cooperation) should be included in the Berlin Process. Another proposed idea was to have regional meetings of the Committees on the EU integration, which would serve to exchange opinions.

Conclusions and recommendations

The participants proposed several conclusions and recommendations. They are not based on consensus but rather reflect the most essential elements of the debate.

- Peace processes in the Western Balkans should be completed, particularly in Bosnia and between Kosovo and Serbia. These issues provide fertile ground for polarization between the opposition and the ruling elites. In that regard, the political narrative of “Europe without frontiers” with the Western Balkans in it could be instrumental in managing these processes.
- All political forces in the Western Balkans Six should engage in dialogue about the democratic standards and the culture of dialogue without preconditions.
- In its relations with the region, the EU and the EU member states should return to the EU values and focus on enticing democracy and the rule of law. Also the EU should support the groups and movements championing EU values.
- Political and bilateral issues should be reframed so as not to hamper the processes of EU enlargement. EU member states and the region should also pledge not to block the respective EU integration processes.
- The EU should also establish a broad vision for the region in the EU and start with initiatives focused on bringing the EU closer to the citizens. For example, some of the MPs in the parliaments of the Western Balkans Six could also become the non-voting members of the European Parliament.
- There is a need for a new narrative about EU accession, followed by concrete and tangible benefits for the citizens of the Western Balkans.
- The EU should engage more with the opposition parties in a formal way. Leading EU officials should also regularly meet with the opposition representatives during the visits or in Brussels.
- The ruling majority and the opposition should agree on the most critical EU-related issues and jointly support it. It is detrimental when the issues important for the EU reforms are ignored or undermined by the opposition just because they are part of the government’s initiative.
- The Western Balkan parliaments should have a strict, logical annual calendar. The practice of using emergency sessions should be stopped and reserved only for when there is an emergency.
- The reform of the electoral systems should be considered so that the citizens influence both the election of the parties and the selection of the actual candidates for MPs in the parliament. In such a way, the MPs are more responsible to the voters than to the party leaders.
- The standards for the speakers of the parliament should be respected. Nowadays, many speakers of the parliaments in the region act almost solely in a partisan manner, favoring the ruling majority and undermining the rights of the opposition.
- Parliament should adopt the practice of opposition days, i.e. the special sessions of parliament where the opposition sets the agenda and runs the session.
- Parliaments should also be more formally included in the Berlin Process. Members of the committees tasked with regional cooperation and EU integration could be included in this initiative with the goal to create a venue for exchange of experiences.
- The group invited into these CIG-AA meetings should initiate setting up a “Team for the Berlin Process,” which could start working on the ideas presented at the meetings.

Participants

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