

Accelerating Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans

Introduction

The Western Balkans faces a complex landscape of regional disputes hindering broader cooperation efforts. Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal political disagreements and the ongoing tensions between Kosovo and Serbia in particular hamper regional cooperation and negatively impact the region's EU integration. The Berlin Process, initiated ten years ago to advance the EU membership for the Western Balkans, remains a crucial instrument for resolving bilateral and internal disputes within the region, fostering economic cooperation, and promoting sustainable growth. While it has facilitated significant connectivity projects and regional agreements, challenges persist.

The geopolitical dynamics have revived the EU's interest for expansion and raised hopes of aspiring members for accelerated integration. The opening of accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova and granting the candidate status to Georgia are building momentum also for the Western Balkan integration. Furthermore, the introduction of the Growth Plan reiterated the EU's commitment for enlargement to the region by offering the six Western Balkan countries some access to EU's single market, boosting regional economic cooperation, and increasing EU's financial assistance to the region. However, with the region's increasing emigration and declining economic prospects, the Western Balkan countries call on the EU for a more proactive role in the region and seek a tentative date for EU membership.

To discuss the region's cooperation challenges, the future of the Berlin Process, and the common path toward EU integration, the Council for Inclusive Governance gathered senior politicians from the Western Balkans countries on July 1, 2024, in Skopje, North Macedonia. The roundtable was organized in cooperation with and was funded by the German Federal Foreign Office (AA). The discussion adhered to the Chatham House Rule, thus ensuring the confidentiality of the participants' contributions. This report is a collective summary of the overall discussion and may not necessarily reflect the opinions of individual participants, CIG, or FDFA. Gresa Baftiu, CIG's Associate in Kosovo, prepared the report.

Recommendations

Participants proposed a number of recommendations on regional cooperation, conflict resolution, and EU accession. These recommendations are not necessarily based on consensus but reflect the discussion in broader terms.

1. Enhance EU Support and Engagement:

- The EU should provide clearer indications and timelines for the Western Balkans' EU accession. For example, 2030 could be such a target date with 2027 becoming the year of assessment. The region, in turn, could consider drafting its own regional action plan for EU membership in 2030. Kosovo should be given a clear EU integration path.

- Germany and other EU members should continue to play a leading role in facilitating regional cooperation.
 - A gesture of good will and belonging could be allowing Western Balkan citizens use EU lanes at passport controls on entry into EU.
 - The Regional Cooperation Council should become more of a strategic leader of regional cooperation and less of a project-driven organization.
2. **Strengthen Regional Cooperation Mechanisms:**
- The EU should establish a regional monitoring and reporting mechanism to track the progress of the Growth Plan and the Berlin Process agreements' implementation. A stronger perception needs to be created that the Berlin Process and the region's EU integration are part of the same path.
 - The region should consider establishing a Balkan Schengen zone to make borders in the region less relevant and to promote free movement and economic cooperation. The region should consider a joint visa for third-country nationals.
 - Develop mechanisms that would not allow one country block the rest of the region from advancing cooperation and implementing already achieved agreements.
 - The EU together with the countries of the region should find a mechanism on how to take CEFTA out of its current deadlock.
 - Consider defining for each year what concrete success the region needs to achieve in regional cooperation and measure results at the end of each year. For example, the 2025 plan could include establishment of green lanes and completion of a major regional green energy project, and the 2026 plan establishment of a regional labor market.
3. **Address Internal and Bilateral Disputes:**
- The EU and the US should support efforts to resolve bilateral disputes, particularly between Kosovo and Serbia.
 - The EU should promote dialogue and cooperation on joint projects to build trust and reconciliation in the Western Balkans.
 - EU should engage with EU member states when they raise bilateral issues during enlargement and not just accept them as a *fait accompli*.
4. **Promote Economic Integration:**
- The Western Balkans jointly with the EU should prioritize connectivity projects and economic cooperation to boost regional development.
 - The region should implement agreements on green lanes and recognition of professional qualifications.
 - EU should consider a free roaming agreement with the Western Balkans.
5. **Increase Political Commitment:**
- Regional leaders should demonstrate greater political will and commitment to regional cooperation and EU integration.
 - Make regional cooperation more visible to parliaments and citizens. Encourage local politicians to communicate the benefits of regional cooperation to their citizens and make it part of the national debates.
 - Political leaders in the Western Balkans should enhance their personal interactions. There is very little actual off-the-record conversation that takes place among them.
 - Leaders should work on promoting a culture of peace in the region.
6. **Facilitate Institutional Capacity Building:**
- The countries in the region should strengthen the institutional capacities to implement regional cooperation initiatives effectively.
 - The region should consider bringing regional institutions under one umbrella by establishing a body to oversee and coordinate all regional cooperation efforts.

7. *Foster Cultural Cooperation:*

- The Western Balkans should promote cultural initiatives and exchanges to build a culture of cooperation and mutual understanding in the region.
- Increase high-school and university exchanges and increase youth mobility inside the region.
- Encourage joint public appearances and positive narratives from regional leaders to build public trust in cooperation efforts.

Bridging Borders: Advancing Western Balkan Cooperation for EU Integration

Despite the negative geopolitical dynamics, the Western Balkan's integration remains a high priority on the EU's agenda. Germany, a strong supporter of the Berlin Process, emphasized the importance of regional cooperation as a prerequisite for EU membership. A participant suggested that the Western Balkan leaders seize the opportunity of the region's current geopolitical position and undertake reforms which enhance economic cooperation and move closer to EU membership.

Some others said that the EU enlargement fatigue persisted among member states. "Those in favor of expansion often say "yes, but," while those opposed respond with "no, and," indicating a lack of readiness to fully embrace the Western Balkans." One speaker added that the EU should reform as well. "The ongoing process of qualifying majority voting and internal issues within the EU27 highlight the fact that adding ten new, less developed member states could exacerbate existing challenges."

Other participants were more sceptic of the region's progress in regional cooperation and criticized domestic leaders for failing to deliver on both technical and political aspects. They called for greater maturity and ownership of their leaders, emphasizing the need for the region to take more responsibility in implementing all agreements.

All six Western Balkan countries have committed to implementing the Common Regional Market, a significant reform that has the potential to boost the region's economies. The CRM aims to enhance and encourage the exchange of workers and professionals within the region, thereby bringing the countries closer both economically and politically. However, the current situation on the ground reflects a less ambitious reality with Bosnia and Herzegovina's inability to ratify the agreement for visa-free travel within the region, and Kosovo's veto in CEFTA due to unresolved representation issues. Most participants highlighted the need for a cooperative and compromise mindset among the countries, criticizing the "1 vs. 5" mentality which undermines regional integration.

One participant said that political developments within the region are the main factor impacting the pace of both regional cooperation and EU integration. "Many issues in the region are closely linked to the progress or lack thereof in the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia." While some agreements, such as those related to the mutual recognition of diplomas, have been positive yet not fully implemented due to political reasons. Some participants believed that the Berlin Process would help the countries in the region to overcome 'such 'bilateral' issues. "The goals of the Berlin Process, which include reconciliation and improved bilateral cooperation, should be initiated through economic cooperation to foster socio-economic development in disputed areas, subsequently building trust and leading to reconciliation." Some others believed that resolving disputes first could fully unlock the potential of the region's economic

cooperation. Nevertheless, there was broad consensus that the countries should support each other's progress and cooperate in good faith. If the region genuinely wants to be part of the EU, it should start behaving as such. This is how the EU works.

The Growth Plan represents a significant EU initiative to reaffirm its commitment to enlargement in the Western Balkans. One of its core principles is that countries cannot hinder others' progress within the single market, they can only impede their own advancement. This approach is designed to foster a constructive and cooperative environment within the region. The EU's new strategy with the Growth Plan has the potential to positively influence the behavior of these countries. A speaker highlighted that the preparations for the Growth Plan have shown that the countries in the region are capable of effective cooperation on regionally significant projects, especially those related to the EU, thereby reinforcing their commitment to EU integration.

One participant suggested that a monitoring and reporting model for the Growth Plan deliverables be proposed by the region itself rather than the EU, in order to reiterate the region's commitment to join the EU and at the same time to foster cross-country cooperation. Most agreed that the Growth Plan be strongly linked with Common Regional Market Two in order to avoid working in divergent tracks which may cause the two projects to overlap. Some suggested that the Western Balkans also enhance their collaboration with EU countries on regional cooperation.

The importance of regional cooperation for the Western Balkans to integrate in the EU is crucial. While significant challenges remain, the Berlin Process and Growth Plan offer valuable frameworks for advancing these efforts. By addressing bilateral disputes, enhancing political commitment, and fostering economic and cultural cooperation, the Western Balkans Six can move closer to their goal of EU membership. Nevertheless, strong support from the EU and the US is essential to accelerate reconciliation and unblock regional cooperation and, consequently, EU integration.

Participants agreed that regional cooperation should facilitate the EU integration rather than serve as a substitute for it. All agreements reached within the Berlin Process should be respected and implemented to demonstrate the Western Balkans' readiness to cooperate and prove they can be reliable EU partners.

Participants

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