Political Parties and Policy Priorities in the Western Balkans

Introduction

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) convened its second regional meeting for senior political party officials from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The meeting took place on December 8-9 in Tirana, Albania. The participants discussed the internal and external challenges confronting the region and explored ways in which political parties could address them. The Western Balkans' integration into the EU has slowed down for both external and internal reasons: the EU is going through its internal difficulties and therefore is postponing any further enlargement, and the Western Balkans is still suffering from the legacy of past conflicts, mistrust, poor economies, and weak democratic systems. The participants concluded that political parties could promote more internal democratic development, regional cooperation, accelerate reforms needed for the EU integration, and promote overall democratic values and their understanding in the region.

The roundtable is part of a CIG initiative on regional cooperation and democratic development supported by and implemented in cooperation with the German Federal Foreign Office.

It is difficult and sensitive for political party representatives to take bold action in promoting regional cooperation. Even just sitting with each other remains sensitive among their publics. A random photo taken by a hotel guest showing Kosovo and Serbian representatives sitting at the same table at this meeting was debated for days in Pristina and Belgrade, labeling the participants as traitors and betraying national interests. "Imagine French and German representatives 20 years after the Second World War still having problems with sitting at the same table," a speaker pondered, adding that, "they were instead building the foundations of the European Union. While in our region it is still problematic to talk to each other, let along build anything new." The media reporting of the photo and negative public reactions in both countries demonstrate a huge democratic deficit in many social sectors in the region. Virtually not a single media outlet, analyst, or political commentator was interested in the content of the meeting, let alone supporting such initiatives. If this kind of reporting is any guide, the Western Balkans is up for a rough long ride.

This report is based on the roundtable discussions held under the Chatham House Rule. The participants took part in the discussions in the 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.

Matching national and regional priorities

There is a match between a number of national and regional priorities. Air pollution, lack of rule of law, and fight against organized crime and corruption are areas on which the countries could cooperate.

The air pollution is one of the biggest national and regional threats, quietly killing thousands of people annually. Skopje, Pristina, Sarajevo, and frequently Belgrade top the list of the world's most polluted cities. The participants explained that they have ideas but not the financial means on how to address air pollution fast and effectively, but agreed that this should be the region's top priority. Upgrading their coal-fired power plants, moving towards renewable energy, and implementing strict car emission standards were some of the recommended steps. The European Union and the Berlin Process are two mechanisms that could help the region in this regard with expertise and funding.

The freedom of movement is another area that would benefit both individual countries and the region. A speaker reported that last year trucks spent over 26 million hours waiting at border crossings in the Western Balkans, a region of about 20 million people, the population size of Romania. "We urgently need to think of out of the box solutions,' a speaker noted. Easing restrictions on freedom of movement of people is urgent. Removing barriers to trade and investment should follow this move. A so-called 'Mini Schengen Initiative' led by Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia aims to address these issues, but Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro seem skeptical of the objectives of the initiative. "It is a good idea in principle, but we are skeptical of the objectives," said a participant. Another speaker said that the leaders of the three initiating countries should do more to remove this skepticism. "They are instead doing the opposite."

Though all agree in principle that the free movement of people, goods, and capital is beneficial for all, the legacy of the past and mistrust are not giving way to cooperation. Some speakers said that the regional cooperation should be "fair and equal," considering that the current initiative is not such, especially when Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina do not recognize Kosovo's independence. There was consensus that the EU will apply a 'policy of containment' regarding the Western Balkans and that the region itself should fix some issues. "We should ask ourselves whether we could resolve the major outstanding disputes ourselves. If we conclude that we cannot, then we should put these disputes aside and work on other smaller things."

Education is one of the biggest casualties of the decades-long conflicts. After the Yugoslav break-up followed by ethnic wars, the education system was not a priority for the then governments. Though the labor market demands have changed drastically, the

educational system in the Western Balkans follows the old methodology. The participants considered that the rather cosmetic changes in the past few years are not sufficient to prepare the students for a 21-century labor market. The countries should invest more in vocational schools and diversify their curricular activities and the teaching methodology, bringing it closer to the western model. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) again this year showed disappointing results for the region. The region should work together in overhauling the educational system with the aim of improving performance. PISA showed that even high school students had problems with reading skills. Such generation would have pretty grim prospects on the job market. A speaker said that it is time to rethink a new education reform because "what we have is simply not working." Participants recommended that the Western Balkan countries should also recognize each other's university diplomas.

Tolerance and understanding is a key pre-condition for building democratic societies and promoting regional cooperation. The Western Balkan societies need to become more tolerant and respect other positions. The legacy of the past remains problematic for the region. "We still live in the past, in a harsh past," a speaker said. Many participants recommended that politicians should stay away from offering their interpretations of history or comment on war crimes. "Leave history to historians and war crimes to judiciaries." There is plenty of anger among the populations who are not willing to "forget and forgive." Another speaker said that the region needs to change its "system of values," seeing each other as an eventual partner, not enemy. There was an almost consensus that the political leaders and intellectual elites are not contributing to tolerance and understanding. "We have all fallen into the trap of nationalism and patriotism," a speaker said, adding that "we should upgrade our understanding of these terms, nationalism and patriotism of the 21st century are different from those of the 19th century."

Security cooperation is essential for the region's stability. There was agreement that the region should not spend money on buying weapons. Serbia will not buy any new weapons and hardware starting in 2020, and some participants said that they hope this would encourage the others in the region to follow the same path. Some said that the weapons are no longer a threat. "Security in the region is guaranteed by NATO," so an arms race in the region would be a bad policy and a waste of resources. Kosovo participants said that Kosovo should become a member of Interpol to genuinely contribute to regional security initiatives.

Potential specific initiatives

The participants came up with a number of regional cooperation ideas that could be taken independently or with the support of the Berlin Process. They agreed to work at their next meetings in 2020 on a regional cooperation strategy that would include those national interests that match the region's interests. The strategy would be implemented by 2022. The participants said that they would define the issues, the implementation methodology, and lobby through their parties and party leaders for the implementation process. The following items were mentioned as possible strategy components:

1. Freedom of movement of people in the region. The countries should begin with easing restrictions aiming at full free movement within an agreed period of time.
2. Cooperation on regional infrastructure projects and regional employment strategies through the Berlin Process. Though some participants were skeptical of such initiatives, others were confident it could be done, mentioning the regional roaming agreement as a difficult but a successful story.
3. Regional economic development through joint approaches, utilizing and mobilizing the existing money in the region, not just to wait for foreign investment.
4. Intellectual mobility, including teacher student exchanges.
5. E-customs for the region or one-stop border crossings and mutual recognition of digital certificates.
6. Police cooperation.
7. Connecting the region through direct flights. If not profitable, the governments could subsidize such flights.
8. Completing the Pristina-Nis highway.

Although little could be done to improve the overall economic situation without political stability and substantial investment, there is sufficient room to activate the economic potential of the Western Balkans. An economic activation of the region will pay multiple dividends: it will spur growth by utilizing the underused human resources and gradually eliminate the "brain drain." Most of the participants noted that young educated citizens are moving to other countries for lack of employment opportunities at home. If no incentives are produced to discourage this trend, it may have disastrous long-term consequences for the region. The entire region remains vulnerable to the brain drain syndrome, and the long-term effects could be severe.

Political parties and quality of democracy

Though moving steadily towards consolidation, the political parties in the Western Balkans are still in transition: politicians continue to move from one party to another, new parties and civic initiatives are being formed, and political parties and alliances continue to split and regroup. Former foes become friends and forge fluid, and sometimes, strange political and government coalitions while former allies and friends become bitter adversaries. The region lacks multiethnic parties. Many believe these splits are primarily based on personal and partisan gains rather than on ideological and policy differences.

Although the public political debate is about policies and strategies, voters in the region, according to many participants, believe that their political representatives are only striving to prolong their own stay in power to maximize their own private gains rather than advance public interest. Some reported that the population is growing cynical, viewing the bickering within and between parties and party leaders as petty, selfish, and far removed from their needs. Confidence in parties is plummeting. Voter turnout in the region has also been decreasing substantially.

The participants said that in the transitional political context of the Western Balkans is often hard to frame long-term coherent and cohesive policies. There is little policy continuation when governments change. A speaker reported that when his party came recently to power in his country, the public administration was in a mess. The administrations are also not professional and thus hard to formulate and implement policies coherently. A speaker explained that even when they implement good policies, it usually takes time for the effects to become visible to the public. "We are taking some measure on air pollution now, but it will take a few years for the public to see the results."

The participants identified a number of problems facing their countries and the region, but recognized that the process of identification of problems is always easier than the formulation and implementation of policies to address them. The governments easily identify problems and challenges facing their countries but "the matter becomes complicated when it comes to generating proposals to resolve them." The objectives of government policies are often ambiguous, lacking detail and realistic financial cost. It was suggested that more professionals who understand the issues, including those outside politics, should be involved in policymaking.

Participants agreed that independent institutions, effective balance of power, competent judiciary, and an independent and professional media are the key components of an effective liberal democracy. Just like in the rest of the world, the Western Balkan democracies have experienced some backsliding, but many participants said that the region's democracy is not under threat. They called for strengthening and greater institutionalizing of political parties in the region. The channels available to parties for holding actors accountable are both formal, such as legislative and electoral activity, and informal, such as protests. Political parties are thus essential in establishing an accountable and democratic behavior of political officials and making democracies more effective. Some argued that political parties are the best mechanism to improve the accountability of political leaders by reinforcing the formal checks and balances and making democracy a self-enforcing system. They concluded that party development is also considered as evidence of higher levels of democracy.

Institutionalized parties have strong, stable bases of support, good organizations, and objectives that are distinct to both voters and candidates. By contrast, weakly institutionalized parties have poorly articulated platforms, weak organization, and lack stable bases of support. In institutionalized party systems, most meaningful competition occurs between established political parties, with relatively stable patterns of inter-party competition. In the region, party competition is rather aggressive and cooperation between governing and opposition parties is almost inexistent.

The core representational and governmental roles of the parties are a) *electoral mobilization;* b) *issue structuring* (structures the choices among competing groups of candidates along different issue dimensions); c) *social representation (*represent different social groups); d) *interest aggregation (*aggregate specific interests into broader and governing coalitions. This takes place after an election when a coalition is negotiated and

formed. It is important for the coherence of public policy and 'policy stability.'); and e) *form and sustain government*.

In conclusion, the participants noted that despite occasional excesses the nationalistic euphoria and rhetoric in the region is fading at a faster rate than ever before and bread-and-butter issues are making their way to the top of the priority list. The public reactions to the so-called national issues are not as strong, and for the first time we see Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs protesting in Shterpce/Strpce together against projects that harm their environment. According to various analyses, the list of priorities is the same for all people in the region. Therefore, preconditions do exist to intensify the political and economic cooperation to produce effective national and regional policies and ensure their implementation with the aim of improving peoples' lives.

Participants

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Natasa Gacesa, International Secretary, Socialist Party of Serbia

Shpetim Gashi, Vice President, Council for Inclusive Governance

Ardian Gjini, Deputy Chairman, Alliance for the Future of Kosovo; Mayor of Gjakova

Aleksandra Jerkov, Vice President, Democratic Party; Member, Parliament of Serbia

Belind Kellici, Chairman, Youth Forum and Member, Presidency, Democratic Party of Albania

Shpati Kolgega, Deputy International Secretary, Socialist Party of Albania; Deputy Minister of Education, Sports, and Youth of Albania

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Damjan Manchevski, Vice President, Social Democratic Union of Macedonia; Minister of Information Society and Administration of North Macedonia

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

Timco Mucunski, International Secretary, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity

Igor Novakovic, Associate, Council for Inclusive Governance

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