

Berlin Process: Most needed initiative for the Western Balkan region

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We, the undersigned civil society actors and academics from the Western Balkans acclaim the announcement by the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz of a Western Balkans Summit in Berlin in November 2022 to give a new impetus to the Berlin Process. Mindful of this perspective, we reaffirm our commitment to contribute to this most needed initiative for the Western Balkan region.

The Berlin Process was widely praised for its role in taking regional cooperation to an unprecedented level. It was doing so at a critical time, when the sustainability of peace, reconciliation and democratisation processes set in motion after the wars of the '90s has come under severe strain and ethno-nationalist forces and external authoritarian influences have increasingly jeopardised the Euro-Atlantic trajectory of the Western Balkan region.

While the EU and its Member States have, since the Feira Summit in 2000, repeatedly reaffirmed their backing for the EU integration of the six Western Balkan countries, the progress has been very slow, and the EU has failed to act in coherence on its promises made to the Western Balkan region. Although the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia is a significant step forward, the damaging delay to get to this stage was notable. Also, granting visa liberalization for Kosovo has been left behind, disregarding all the visa liberalization criteria fulfilled by Kosovo. By not living up to its promises, the EU is significantly harming its credibility in the Western Balkans and the trust and hope that citizens in the region have put in the EU.

Resulting of stalled EU integration/accession process, mistrust and disappointment tend to become increasingly explicitly voiced, while other actors harness this situation with clearly distinct paradigms of partnership, diplomacy, state sovereignty, human rights, freedom of expression, and rule of law.

As Russian aggression against Ukraine has been underway since 2014, we warn that such conflicts and their possible backlashes for the Western Balkan region are a blunt reminder that stability and peace are not set in stone, and hence must be constantly promoted. Also, the impact of nationalistic rhetoric aimed at turning the Western Balkan citizens against one another, and malign foreign interference, including Russia's hybrid attacks, should not be overlooked. This deteriorated environment calls for a stronger security emphasis in the Berlin Process.

The **analysis** of European support for progress in the Western Balkans under the Berlin Process, with a focus on the period culminating in the 2020 Sofia and 2021 Berlin Summits, highlights in particular that:

- The creation of a Common Regional Market and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans have enormous positive potential – but fine words now need assiduous follow up.
- The establishment of 'Green Lanes' to facilitate movement during the COVID-19 pandemic and the abolition of roaming charges have provided further successful examples of regional cooperation – even if there is much more that could be done to enhance connectivity, digital inclusion and freedom of movement across the region and into European Union (EU) countries.

- Doubts over EU integration and accession processes on all sides risk undermining political and technical progress towards regional reconciliation, cooperation and integration. For example, being composed of only three of the six Western Balkan countries, the 'Open Balkan' Initiative could undermine the strong potential of the Common Regional Market, which enjoys wider regional buy-in.
- There is room for greater focus on security challenges in the region within the Berlin Process – but these relate more to building societal demand for action on organized crime, corruption and ethno-nationalism than investing in counter-terrorism.
- Engagement with civil society, youth and environmental movements – despite being a relative strength of the Berlin Process to date – could be markedly improved, with knock-on benefits in all other areas. Youth structures, in particular, have further untapped potential.
- Reconciliation efforts remain stuck, and thus warrant more dedicated political engagement, more careful process design and greater inclusivity.
- BP work on Roma integration appears encouraging if kept in focus.

However, the analysis also shows that overall, the Berlin Process is at a crossroads. While it has had some notable policy successes, and the dialogue it promotes is as necessary as ever, further tangible progress on key regional issues is now growing increasingly urgent. Lack of a clear governance structure, weak institutional memory and fluctuations in priorities of leading states – as well as tensions and weak incentives for progress within the region – could undermine all this.

The Berlin Process's complementarity to formal EU enlargement processes also needs fine-tuning. For the potential of the Berlin Process to be maintained and for peacebuilding, democratisation and Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans to move ahead, a group of countries and leaders must now take on the mantle.

Building on this analysis, we offer the Berlin Process organisers and stakeholders recommendations in six areas:

1. Enable the Berlin Process to regain momentum by giving it a stronger backbone, setting it on firmer ground and enabling it to share, coordinate, learn and adapt.
2. Unleash the full potential of the Western Balkans civil society within the Berlin Process by integrating it as an engine of ideas and accountability.
3. Use the Berlin Process to craft a Western Balkan region where young people have more interconnections, opportunities and voice.
4. Enhance cooperation and synergies across the six Western Balkan countries, and help key initiatives like the Common Regional Market and Green Agenda take flight.
5. Keep reconciliation at the centre of the Berlin Process efforts to build regional cooperation, and build on strong public support for this.
6. Enhance freedom of movement and connectivity.

We, the undersigned, reconfirm our pledge for assuming greater responsibility for monitoring the Berlin Process agendas, holding the governments of the six Western Balkans countries accountable for implementing recommendations from the Berlin Process Summits and meeting EU integration criteria.

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7. Center for Political Courage
8. CIVIL – Center for Freedom, North Macedonia
9. Community Business Development Center (CBDC)
10. Debate Center, Kosovo
11. European Movement in Serbia
12. Ferdinand Nikolla, Civil Society Activist
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26. OJQ VISION 02 Istog
27. OJQ Gruaja Hyjnore Gjilan
28. OJQ Gjeomjedisi/NGO Geo-environment
29. OJQ Ndërto të Ardhmen
30. OJQ Qendra e Gruas ATO Vushtrri
31. OJQ Roma in Action
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