Berlin Process

Overview of the progress by the six Western Balkans countries since London and Poznań Summits

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ACRONYMS

C2C	Citizen-to-citizen
CDI	Cooperation and Development Institute
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign direct investment
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LIP	Large Infrastructure Project
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
P2P	People-to-people
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office
SEE	South-east Europe
SME	Small & Medium Enterprises
UNEP MGCY	United Nations Environmental Program Major Group for Children and Youth
V4	Visegrad Group
WED	World Environment Day
WB/WB6	Western Balkans; Western Balkan Six (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia)
WBIF	Western Balkans Investment Framework
WBYCP	Western Balkans Youth Cooperation Platform

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Executive Summary

This research looks into the progress made by the Western Balkans (WB) countries towards implementing their commitments since the WB Summits in London and Poznań held in 2018 and 2019, as part of the Berlin Process launched in 2014. It is divided into three thematic units: the first is an overview of the Berlin Process, focusing on the London and Poznań Summits and the specific pledges made by the governments on several topics within the respective declarations and chairs' conclusions. The second part follows the progress made on the particular pledges, based on i) recent findings from research and analysis conducted on behalf of various organisations and/or governmental institutions; ii) the results of interviews; iii) the perspective of regional, local, and international media. The third part consists of recommendations, stemming from the findings of both primary and secondary research.

Findings point to the direction that despite existing challenges and gaps, the Berlin Process as a whole has had a considerable positive impact on the Region. It has managed to redirect the focus of the EU back on the Western Balkans Six (WB6) countries and start a high-level dialogue on equal terms between EU-WB6 leaders, reviving the region's declining interest in EU integration. It has placed the Region on a stable position on the EU infrastructure map, united the regional civil society under joint causes, and highlighted the role of citizens and youth in promoting dialogue and social change. It has also brought the issue of reconciliation and transitional justice back on the table, raising it as a matter not only of regional but also international importance, as emphasised within the proceedings of the 2020 Zagreb Summit.

Overall, since the London Summit in 2018, the WB6 countries have been taking small, yet positive steps towards the implementation of their pledges defined in the chairs' conclusions and Summits' declarations. Evidence shows, however, that specific factors are slowing down or discouraging progress:

- In many cases, there is political ambition, but no genuine will. During the Summits, political leaders may take pledges under international pressure but still engage in contradicting actions within their local context. Ongoing bilateral disputes, translated often into controversial measures sabotaging each other's progress, certainly do not serve the spirit of good neighbourly relations, cooperation, and peace.

- Specific pledges made in the field of security and the fight against organised crime have been unrealistic in the way they were initially planned, in terms of both time and capacity. Governments may allegedly exhibit a willingness to promote reforms but lack the institutional infrastructure, the know-how or the skilled workforce to achieve a certain goal within the designated time frame. This phenomenon also applies to the field of energy. Despite the dramatic implications of pollution on citizens' health, the WB6 countries are yet to break their coal dependency. Consequently, green energy has been among the latest priorities of the EU-WB6 dialogue, something highlighted in the Zagreb Summit.

- Entrenched habits, stereotypes and obsolete mentalities of 'doing things' get in the way of achieving progress and interregional cooperation. Ethnic and linguistic alliances, inequality,

blame-culture and nationalist rhetoric spreading division still exist within the WB6 societies. The same can be said about corruption, one of the most pressing challenges for the region.

▪ The Berlin Process has no built-in steering and monitoring mechanism and hosting member states, ad hoc, have no authority to act in an oversight capacity. The absence of an adequate and reliable monitoring mechanism, and of legally binding provisions within the Berlin Process, make it challenging to ensure follow-up action and hold governments accountable for not fulfilling their pledges. While it is possible to a certain extent to assess the technical and economic progress made within the Berlin Process, it is extremely difficult to evaluate social change.

▪ There is a lack of clarity on how the 'stocktaking' of each Summit takes place and how previous Summits inform the agendas of the forthcoming Summits. Evidence shows that every Summit has either added a new topic or prioritised a certain area, reflecting the host country's foreign policy, national interests and relevance to the Region.

▪ Without true reconciliation and dialogue, interregional cooperation - which is the cornerstone of the Berlin Process - will never be fully achieved.

The above-mentioned challenges have effects on the economy of the region. Coupled with severe gaps in infrastructure, they lead to a deepening mistrust by citizens towards their national governments and state institutions, and contribute to outwards mass migration, especially among youth.

The findings show that the WB6 governments need to intensify their efforts to turn their pledges into concrete action. The role of citizens and civil society is paramount in this endeavour: governments need to embrace and support people and organisations, as foreseen by the declarations of all Summits. WB6 countries need to invest in their most significant asset, the young generation. To prevent brain drain, citizens should be given concrete reasons to stay and contribute to the Region's welfare and development. It is critical to give incentives to young entrepreneurs, enhance education and connect it to the real needs of the global labour market and the digitalised world, and support science and research by encouraging the creation of synergies through the exchange of good practices and know-how among the region and beyond. This should be done in parallel with promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law, in order to build towards a sustainable economy and environment.

Introduction

Setting the research

This research had been initially designed in a period when there were no visible signs of a global crisis that would change the norms and standards of our realities. The implications of coronavirus have a tremendous effect on human lives and a dramatic toll on global economies, the long-term effects of which cannot be yet calculated. At the same time, the emergency shed light on the great inner strength moving people and societies. The role of youth and the civil society in the WB6 has been essential in the management of the crisis. There have been many stories of individual or collective initiatives,[1] often self-organised,[2] which have covered institutional and technical gaps through self-invented, yet effective, solutions. Citizens and civil society organisations (CSOs) have also used social media in creative ways to spread information, dissolve scaremongering and fake news, self-organise and provide help to vulnerable groups by engaging into a new type of activism.[3] Or 'emergency online youth work'[4] aimed at raising awareness, and facilitating cooperation among the business sector, local authorities, CSOs and ordinary citizens.

The pandemic has been an opportunity to self-assess one's strengths and weaknesses, to redefine visions and change the way of doing things. It would be unfair to focus only on the flaws brought to light and choose to ignore the positive narratives emerging through the crisis, especially at a societal level. The COVID-19 crisis has revealed the huge potential that lies in the development of a shared value system in the region. Public health, closely interconnected with education, environment and energy, transcends borders and ethnicities, socioeconomic status and ideological stances. The fact that in a crisis of this magnitude citizens of the WB6 needed each other to cope with insufficiencies in the health and education sector[5] is one of the many examples highlighting the added value of investing in the 'public good' beyond borders and pursuing a substantial connection.

The impact of the pandemic in the six states of the Western Balkans has been extremely severe, not only at an economic level but also in political, societal and human terms.[6] The coronavirus found the majority of the WB6 countries in politically unstable situations, right before elections, as in the case of Serbia or North Macedonia, and/or within an intense inner polarization, notably seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro. The COVID-19 crisis functioned as a magnifying glass[7], exposing structural deficiencies and institutional weaknesses in the Region. From failing health care systems, vulnerable economies and obsolete educational systems to a malfunctioning labour market. The absence of adequate state mechanisms and human capital able to manage an emergency, and severe gaps in security, leave space for power abuse and human rights violations. The lack of meaningful and sustainable investment in research and technology and the dominance of manipulatable media[8] platforms generating fake news[9] deepen the pre-existing mistrust between states and citizens.[10]

The controversial handling of the crisis by the WB governments has revealed the superficiality of reforms undertaken in the last years with regards to rule of law and democracy. These reforms have proven to be insufficient to fight a deep-rooted inclination towards nationalist rhetoric, scaremongering and polarisation as usual tactics in times of crisis in the hands of strongmen.

The significant gaps in infrastructure, the corruption sabotaging the efficiency of WB6 institutions, and the outbreak of the pandemic exposed a Region which was completely vulnerable and unable to support its citizens. On top of the absence of adequate mechanisms that could help support the WB6 countries in a potential emergency of this magnitude, the COVID19 crisis also revealed a void created by those who had left the Region in the previous years in search of better opportunities abroad. The immense shortage in medical, technical or operational staff, as well as other trained experts of different capacities, is a manifestation of the WB6 governments' failure to invest in their biggest asset, human capital and particular youth.

The COVID-19 crisis has been a hard lesson for both the WB6 and the EU, whose soft power in the Western Balkans was severely impaired by the exposal of its vulnerability and lack of solidarity in a time of crisis,[11] and its initial unpreparedness to support the region,[12] which left plenty of room for third countries to consolidate their presence.[13]

Berlin Process:
vision and scope

Launched in 2014, the Berlin Process constitutes an ambitious initiative with the vision of supporting the six countries of the Western Balkans towards enhanced regional cooperation and EU integration. On the 28th of August 2014, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel hosted a High-Level Conference on the Western Balkans in Berlin, aimed at providing a vis-à-vis forum of communication for EU and WB6 leaders. This initiative shone as a beacon of hope[14] at a time when the region was experiencing enlargement fatigue, that was slowing down the WB countries' integration process.[15]

The four main goals of the Process as outlined in the Final Declaration by the German Chair in 2014 were:

- To make real progress in the reform process;

- To resolve outstanding bilateral and internal issues;

- To achieve reconciliation within and between the societies in the region;

- To enhance regional economic cooperation and lay the foundations for sustainable growth.

Two additions suggested by the WB civil society in 2018 were:

- To make additional progress in the rule of law (specifically to address issues such as corruption, lack of media freedom and state capture);

- To make additional progress with regards to security (to address the challenges stemming from migration, such as the ongoing refugee crisis, brain drain and mass migration (legal or irregular) from the WB6).

The timing of this project has been highly symbolic since its inception: launched a hundred years after the outbreak of the First World War and on the 10th anniversary of the biggest enlargement wave of the European Union to Central and Eastern Europe. The main significance of the initiative was Europe's commitment to promoting peace and security by resolving outstanding bilateral and internal issues, promoting reconciliation within and between the societies in the region, boosting regional economic cooperation and laying the foundations for sustainable growth.[16] The word 'process' itself alluded to the 'continuum' that chancellor Merkel had referred to when clarifying that the particular initiative will be a long-term procedure.[17]

The EU member states involved in the Process embarked on cooperation with the WB6 countries to support reforms and mechanisms that would eventually lead to stronger social, economic and political bonds within the Region as well as facilitate the procedure towards a potential EU entry. The Berlin Process positioned the EU's ambition to be the facilitator of stability, reform, and democratisation in the Western Balkans through a different approach to the adoption of the acquis communautaire.

The Berlin Process is unique in the fact that it is the only high-level political initiative focused on the six WB countries, where the EU member states involved negotiate directly with the six distinct WB governments. Similar previous initiatives to build synergies between the EU and the WB6 states

had not delivered the desired outcomes, due to a number of parameters, among which, the lack of a predefined, long-term agenda, the absence of a coherent plan of action featuring concrete follow-up proposals or even the stakeholders unavailability to be fully engaged, which in the case of the EU could be translated into an inability to grasp the cultural profile and sociopolitical dynamics of the Region and to fully engage member states in supporting the WB, whereas for the WB partners meant a lack of genuine political will to proceed into daring reforms required within the democratization process.[18] [19]

It has taken a cross-sectoral approach by directly including civil society and business sector partners. This level of inclusivity has contributed significantly to the process. The involvement of CSOs in the official negotiations was consolidated after the London Summit. The practice has given new impetus to the Process, quelling criticism of a top-down approach limited to certain political and academic circles. This criticism is often raised about these types of processes.

The Berlin Process has laid the groundwork for various good practices in the WB, some of which are featured in other sections of this report. It has also managed to produce institutions which are the outcome of joint initiatives. Such institutions include the Chamber Investment Forum, established in 2017, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), established in 2016, and the Western Balkans Fund (WBF), established in 2015.[20]

Despite challenges and gaps further elaborated below, the Berlin Process has achieved - via its annual meetings - in keeping the WB6 countries engaged in a discussion between their neighbours and the other EU member states involved. What is expected in the future from both sides is to deliver on their promises and take the necessary steps to move the Berlin Process forward by translating pledges into concrete action.

The Western Balkans Summits in London and Poznań: Symbolism, criticism and the elephant in the room

All the 20 interviewees for this research have been unanimous with regards to one point: the Berlin Process has been a useful and needed initiative. Although all respondents saw an added value in the Process as a whole, there were divergences of opinions with regards to the certain current practices, and recommendations about how to improve this going forward. Nevertheless, this unanimity is an optimistic starting point to discuss the future of the Berlin Process.

The 2018 and 2019 WB Summits in London and Poznań came shortly after the official announcement of the so-called "Berlin Plus" Agenda, an extension of the initial Process originally planned to culminate in 2018. The continuation of the process signifies the EU's willingness to further support the WB towards integration. The road to membership required WB6 countries to exhibit notable progress in designated fields, but despite the important steps taken towards this direction, there was 'still a lot of unfinished work regarding the Commission's suggestions on "perspective 2025", to quote the exact phrase employed by the then President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker.[21] In order to further support action, the London and Poznań Summits aimed to enrich the original Western Balkan agenda by adding more topics,[22] focusing on Economy, Regional Cooperation and Connectivity. These three pillars have been the thematic backbone and compass of the Process since the very beginning.

Both Summits attempted to delve deeper into issues that 'had been present all along the Process but had never been directly or adequately addressed', as one of the interviewees[23] commented. Another respondent characterized these topics as 'complex, controversial matters, still seen as taboos':

> *We would meet and discuss during the Summits, yet, all of us knew that there
> was an elephant in the room that we pretended not to see: bilateral disputes,
> missing persons, corruption, tolerance to organised crime and extremism, frail
> rule of law…These were ugly realities that everyone was aware of, but no one
> would broach. Failure, however, to touch upon these plagues was partly to blame
> for the slow progress exhibited in the Region with regards to reforms. These topics
> had to be put back on the table.*

The selection of the UK and Poland to host the WB Summits in 2018 and 2019 has been a topic of
debate. Concerning London, many of its critics had seen a paradox in appointing the organisations
of an event promoting EU integration to a country which was about to leave the EU.[24] The chaotic
background of Brexit, was certainly not the brightest example for any WB6 country aspiring to join
the EU. The Western Balkans Summit took place in London amid Brexit turmoil; rapid political
developments[25] occurring on the same days in the UK monopolised the media and overshadowed the
Summit. Furthermore, there was an ambiguity in organising a Western Balkan Summit in a country
outside the Schengen zone,[26] where visa requirements make travelling for the citizens of the WB6
extremely hard.[27]

By offering to organise a high-level event right before leaving the EU, the UK hosts were giving
meaning to the mantra that, 'though Britain is leaving the EU, it is not leaving Europe'.[28] Despite Brexit,
the UK Government was demonstrating its commitment to the WB6.[29] Nevertheless, after the London
Summit, the UK seems detached from the geopolitical developments in the Region.[30] Support coming
from the UK has been mainly financial and technical. The UK committed to spending around 40
million pounds on technical assistance; and doubling this amount to 80 million a year by 2020-2021.[31]

The selection of Poznań to be the next host also raised eyebrows, at least in the beginning. Poland,
however, exhibited a concrete interest in the Berlin Process[32] and in becoming 'a constructive actor
in the Region'.[33] The Polish engagement has been manifested in figures, starting with the results of
the Poznań Summit itself, compared to London, for instance. The Chair's Conclusions of the Heads'
meeting of the London Western Balkans Summit, dated 10 July 2018, has been a 2-page document,
briefly mentioning the main points of the Summit.[34] The equivalent document produced in Poznań has
been an 11-page long text, where pledges are presented extensively and there is a reference to follow
up suggestions.[35] There is also a symbolism in the drafting of the conclusions: the weight that each
topic has had on the agenda of each Summit is evident in the place it occupies in the body of the final
document. For instance, 'security' is at the bottom of the Chair's conclusions in Poznań, whereas at the
London document, it is featured as the first chapter right after the traditional reference to the pillars of
the Berlin Process: 'shared European values, prosperity, connectivity and regional cooperation.'

In light of the Poznań Summit approaching, Polish organisers had gone the extra mile to prepare
an agenda responding to the current profile of the Region. Some of the experts interviewed for this
research have shared the backstage of the preparatory phase:

> *Weeks before the Summit, the Polish organisers sent people in the Western
> Balkans to map challenges and progress in the region. Their colleagues went
> visiting places, interviewing people, preparing themselves…
> The Polish were taking this very seriously.[36]*

In this endeavour, Poland had the advantage of the know-how gained within the Visegrad
group.[37] Despite being the only country of the Visegrad quartet participating in the Berlin Process,
the experience in systemic and economic transformations was an extra asset. In time, Poland found
its niche in the Process. The Polish partners showed specific interest in pursuing a breakthrough in the
field of energy, specifically, i) in finding ways to reduce and eventually leave coal production, ii) to help
these regions recover and embrace green forms of energy.

The Zagreb Summit, that took place online on the 6th of May 2020 built upon the previous Summit, highlighting however, unity and solidarity between EU and WB6 states. This manifested in the 'unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans'[38] and the provision of financial assistance to handle the negative repercussions of the pandemic in the Region. Economy, connectivity, resolving of bilateral disputes, green energy and digitalisation are among the topics addressed. In matters of symbolism, the terms selected to be featured in the textual body of the declaration[39] indicate the EU's eagerness to express its support; it is not a coincidence that the word 'support' appears quite frequently. According to the declaration, 'the EU is determined to further intensify its engagement at all levels'.

The London Summit:
Revisiting Reconciliation and Security

The London Summit came after Berlin (2014), Vienna (2015), Paris (2016) and Trieste (2017) Summits in the framework of the Berlin Process, as well as the 25 February 2018 London European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) Western Balkans Investment Summit; 18 April 2018 Skopje Digital Summit and 17 May 2018 Sofia EU-Western Balkans Summit. The Summit took place among the celebration of one of the success stories of the Berlin Process, the signing of the historic Prespa Agreement between Greece and North Macedonia on 17 June 2018.

The London Summit introduced new topics and actors. Following a legacy of being - along with Germany and the United States - one of the top providers of hard security guarantees in the Region ever since the collapse of Yugoslavia[40], the UK put security along with economy and reconciliation on the top of the London Summit agenda,[41] viewing these three as complementary factors enhancing each other when systematically tackled in combination. It is noteworthy that the London Summit concluded with joint declarations[42] signed by both WB6 and EU leaders, on i) regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations within the Berlin Process; ii) missing persons, and iii) war crimes. This did not happen at the Poznań Summit.

Discussions about security revolved around measures to prevent and fight organised crime and corruption, exploring, also, the role of the police, civil society and citizens in raising the standards on the rule of law. One of the key resolutions of the London Summit with regards to security was the endorsement of the Roadmap[43] for a sustainable solution to the illegal possession, misuse and trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons and their ammunition in the Western Balkans, and the agreement that the implementation of the commitments set by the document is essential.[44] The Roadmap aims to 'serve as a guiding and consensual document developed and owned by the regional authorities, in achieving a sustainable solution to the illegal possession, misuse and trafficking of SALW/firearms, and its ammunition, in the Western Balkans.'[45] Approximately two months before the London Summit, on 28-29 May 2018, authorities of the WB met in Tirana, at the 9th Regional Meeting of the SALW Commission. A final draft of the Roadmap was officially sent to the German Federal Foreign Office and was subsequently incorporated into the agenda of the Berlin Process. The official adoption of the Roadmap took place during the London summit.

The WB governments also voiced their commitment to fight corruption by signing anti-corruption pledges (further elaborated in this report under Anti-corruption pledges). The WB6 countries have a long, gloomy record of corruption affecting each branch of the public and private sector[46]. The culture of corruption is embedded deeply in Balkan societies, manifesting itself daily in the form of bribery, nepotism, favouritism and doing business or politics within clientele relations.[47] [48] [49]

Concerning good neighbourly relations, the London Summit was vocal with regards to taking concrete actions to promote Reconciliation, which was viewed as the mainstay of meaningful and sustainable

regional cooperation, based on mutual understanding and trust. Civil society and the youth sector were identified as important actors in the accomplishment of these objectives.

Issues of legacy were brought back to the discussion, such as transitional justice and the facilitation of investigations over the fate of missing persons and victims from the recent bloody wars which had devastating consequences in the region. Before the Summit, there were vigorous conversations over the future of RECOM[50]. The coalition for RECOM was advocating the agreement on establishing this interstate commission in July 2018 at the London Summit[51], while the favourable stance projected through the regional media[52] created the impression that there would be a positive development. Despite this, four of the six WB6 governments did not sign the declaration,[53] and the UK Foreign Ministry amended the agenda of the Summit omitting the signing ceremony of the Declaration.[54] The issue of RECOM emerged again recently in the context of the Zagreb Summit, which took place on 6 May 2020 via video conference due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On the 19th of June 2020, The European Parliament, urged the Western Balkan countries to comply with their international obligations in the prosecution of war crimes and the determination of the fate of missing persons, and to support, RECOM.[55]

Brain drain and mass migration from the WB6 countries were among the key topics addressed in the London Summit. The WB6 leaders pledged to invest in improving quality in education and connecting the formal educational system with the labour market, taking into account the dynamics of a globalised and digitalised world. Focus was given to the creation of the necessary standards in the Region which would allow young people to prosper in their own countries. In this context, emphasis was put on the need to invest further in research and innovation. The involved parties also recognised the values of ongoing vocational training, international learning experience and the importance of making use of all educational possibilities available in an increasingly globalised context.

The Poznań Summit: Expanding the Agenda

The Poznań Summit agenda identified economy and connectivity as key priority areas. Facilitation of people's mobility was viewed as a vital aspect in fostering a regional economic area.

Among the topics that emerged was the need to engage in more digital integration, as agreed within the Consolidated Multi-annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area in the WB6 in 2017. The WB6 governments committed to enrich their digital integration agenda and take the steps needed to promote cybersecurity and broadband development.

The WB6 committed to supporting Education, Research and Innovation in the Region. With regards to education, progress had already been made after the London Summit and the endorsement of the Declaration on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications,[56] which sets forward an automatic recognition model for higher education qualifications and study periods spent abroad.

The declaration on Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications was expected to be adopted during the Poznań Summit, but this did not come into fruition at this stage, as according to the Chair's Conclusions, 'negotiations of a Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications were not possible to be completed in time for the Poznań Summit'[57]. Insights from the interviews undertaken for this research confirmed unofficial comments that the declaration failed to be adopted due to bilateral disputes between Kosovo and Serbia. According to interviewees, the same happened with some other agreements relative to trade that failed to be adopted in Poznań allegedly due to Serbia's withdrawal.

As a complementary measure to address youth migration and brain drain in the Region, leaders in Poznań agreed on the need to foster entrepreneurship, with a focus on youth and social entrepreneurship. It was the first time that social entrepreneurship was mentioned in a WB Summit. Discussions also focused on ways to support projects initiated by youth, vulnerable or minority groups and making good use of the Youth Guarantee Scheme, a €10 million initiative launched by the

European Commission and the European Investment Fund at the beginning of 2019. The scheme has been designed to support youth employment in the WB and is expected to leverage investment of at least €60 million for young people in the Region, aiming to strengthen their entrepreneurial capacity and provide job opportunities.

A highlight of the Poznań Summit was the Western Balkans Business Forum, which brought together representatives of Governments, the Business sector and civil society.

The Think-Tank Forum was also a novelty, designed on a methodology alluding to the Visegrad 4 approach of organising meetings. Based on the principle that joint work could bring results in the Region, the Polish presidency of the Berlin Process initiated meetings of experts in the Think-Tank Forum format where experts from the WB were included in the network of analytical organisations from the EU.

With regards to energy and ecology, the 'Clean Energy Transition Declaration' highlighted the need for the WB6 countries to reduce their dependence on coal and provide the necessary institutional and structural framework that will allow investment on sustainably, eco-friendly forms of energy. The Summit also set the ground for the preparation of the "Green Agenda" for the WB.

The WB6 officials also committed to making provisions for the gradual smart transformation of cities. The Forum of Cities and Regions "Investing in Western Balkans-Investing in Europe" that took place between 4-6.06.2019 featured many good practices and research findings of smart specialisation and investment opportunities in the Western Balkans, as well as discussions about the EU's macro-regional strategy in the Region.[58]

Delivering on promises

3

This chapter juxtaposes the pledges undertaken by the WB6 governments
in each thematic category with the progress made after the London and Poznań Summits.

EU-WB6: European values and EU integration

Alluding to the 2003 'Thessaloniki promise' of a European perspective for the WB, one of the core ambitions of the Berlin Process has been to gradually prepare the WB countries to enter the EU by assisting them in reaching certain standards at a social, economic, political and institutional level that would allow them to be eligible to engage in membership talks with the EU. Although it had been made clear by the EU Commissioner Jean-Claude Juncker back in 2014[59] that there would be no enlargement provisions until 2019, the vision of EU accession has been a driving force for the WB6 stakeholders and the respective citizens. Consequently, the key EU actors in the Berlin Process have used the prospect of EU entry as a carrot and stick, to either motivate WB6 countries and to hold them accountable for not making enough progress with regards to pledges taken.

Let us briefly go back to the period before the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, to trace where the EU-WB6 relations were with regards to geopolitical developments and steps taken towards the EU integration process.

At the beginning of 2020, Brussels looked like an optimistic place, having survived losing its second-largest economy, Britain. The news about the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia received a warm welcome in the Region, counterbalancing the bitterness experienced after the block of Albania and North Macedonia EU membership bids[60] in October 2019. The French President Emmanuel Macron had addressed the EU Summit, stating that WB countries were 'taking pledges' but not implementing the necessary reforms that would allow membership talks to begin. President Macron[61] claimed that the two candidate countries had not exhibited sufficient progress in areas such as migration management,[62] economic policy, human rights, anti-corruption measures and the rule of law.[63]

A few months later, in March 2020, the new European Commission, gave the green light to open accession talks with the two countries, identifying 2020 as a 'key year for the EU-Western Balkans relations'.[64] In a triumphant official announcement, positioning the EU as an institution that 'delivers on its promise', the Commission praised the two candidate countries for doing 'what was asked of them'.[65] The same announcement was voicing a firm message towards the WB as a whole, emphasising that 'the present and the future' of the region 'is in the EU'.

The EU's decision to open the negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in a time of crisis was a diplomatic move within its new geopolitical agenda. The EU aimed at 'restoring' its name and influence in the Region after the damage caused by the October 2019 accession block, a move characterised by the outgoing European Commission president, Jean-Claude Juncker, as a "historic mistake". In other words, the EU had to find a remedy to regain credibility and revitalise its fading relationship with the

Western Balkan countries and their citizens, who had been 'waiting long for something positive to happen'.[66]

A feeling of general disappointment among WB6 governments and societies[67] had added to the re-emerging Euroscepticism[68] and nationalism in the region[69] , serving as an extra tool in the hands of authoritarian politicians.[70] [71] [72] These political figures, often connected with dark pages of the history, attempted (and at times succeeded) to further consolidate their power during the pandemic by taking anti-democratic public measures and manipulating the media to spread division and entrench nationalism[73] [74][75], feeding on anti-European narratives, as suggested by the latest report issued by the European External Action Service (EEAS) in April 2020.[76]

By reviving the hope of accession, accompanied with a generous package of financial aid,[77] coming with some delay,[78] the EU aimed, to mitigate Euroscepticism among WB6 societies[79] , a strategy which seems to be efficient judging from the figures provided at the latest Balkan Barometer.[80]

In addition, the EU tried to counterbalance the growing influence of other powers in the Region, such as China,[81] the Gulf Countries, and Russia, which have employed their 'COVID-19 diplomacy' as part of a wider strategy of increasing influence in the Balkans,[82] that started several years ago.[83] [84] [85] In this respect, the EU mobilised a package of over €410 million in reallocated bilateral financial assistance to support the Western Balkans during the coronavirus emergency.[86]

The EU has manifested its support to the WB6 countries mainly in the form of financial and/or technical aid. Large scale infrastructure projects have been made possible thanks to EU funds and can be included in the list of tangible outcomes of the Process. Among these are the Adriatic Ionian Corridor (AIC)[87] and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP)[88]. One of the most recent projects celebrated a few weeks before the COVID-19 outbreak was the beginning of the construction of the 2.4 kilometre Tunnel at the Ponirak-Vraca subsection part of the Corridor Vc Highway project, near Zenica in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in which the EU committed to investing €31 million.[89]

What has also been expected from the WB6 countries are deeper social reforms, supporting the democratisation process through the adoption of the acquis and enabling the consolidation of meaningful regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations. Exploring the potential of human capital within the Berlin Process has been vital in this sense, translated into the involvement of youth and civil society as promoters of social change and seen as an investment in people's mobility. EU support has often been missing this social aspect, which can have a meaningful and sustainable impact on citizens and societies. This applies not only to local and regional projects but also to larger EU programs that have proven to be beneficial for students, researchers and young entrepreneurs - such as the Erasmus Plus Program - offering life-changing experiences to EU citizens. Opportunities for WB6 citizens are much more limited and when present, they tend to be available only to people whose passport allows them to travel more easily, without going through the lengthy and costly procedures of acquiring a visa. Travelling is even more difficult for citizens of Kosovo; with Kosovo being the only country with no visa-free regime in place, Kosovars face lengthy and bureaucratic procedures to obtain a visa.[90]

Connectivity and Interregional Cooperation as drivers of economic growth

Connectivity has been a central aspect of the Berlin Process and has come to symbolise the aspiration of laying the foundations of infrastructure that will enable a dynamic interconnection of governments, institutions, businesses and people within the Region; a multi-layered, interactive system with solid extensions to the EU and other international entities. Connectivity within the Berlin Process has acquired a status which goes beyond economic growth touching on societies and citizens, seen as

agents of change. In this sense, any progress made on Connectivity and Interregional Cooperation should be examined on three levels: the political, the economic and the social.

One of the most important gains for the Region stemming from the connectivity agenda is that the Western Balkans managed to secure a spot in the transport and energy connectivity map of the EU.[91] In the last few years, there has been some needed investment in heavy infrastructure. It's important to note that the current poor state of infrastructure negatively affects transport, trade and tourism in the region.[92]

Economic growth in the region has been slow, yet visible[93]. Following a gradual slowdown since mid-2018, economic activity reaccelerated in the Western Balkans in the third quarter of 2019[94], where the annual real GDP growth averaged 4.1%, up from 2.9% in the previous three months. Real GDP was expected to grow between 3.0% and 3.8% in 2020, if it had not been for the pandemic. The foundation of the Western Balkans Chamber Investment Forum (WB6-CIF) has been essential for boosting business and investment in the Region. In the Poznań Summit, leaders renewed their support and welcomed the establishment of the WB6–EU Business Platform, which aims at enhancing the competitiveness of the WB economies. The WB6 representatives also committed to supporting the Regional Investment Reform Agenda and to intensifying regional cooperation efforts in the area of financial markets diversification, by making good use of the immense opportunities offered within the realm of technological and digital development.

In this context, the Online Investment Platform[95] is one of the good practices in the field of regional cooperation aimed at attracting foreign investment, a key driver of growth in emerging markets. The platform uses the dynamics of a digitalised world to facilitate market access and raise the region's attractiveness to foreign direct investment, by showcasing investment opportunities, as well as the macroeconomic performance and experience of each WB6 with domestic and foreign investment. The project was developed by the regional chamber of commerce and the Chamber Investment Forum, bringing together the national chambers of the six Western Balkan countries. Launched at the London Summit with the endorsement of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the platform provides a 'one-stop-shop' for foreign investors interested in the Western Balkans, featuring information on the legal and regulatory frameworks in the six countries.

Another good practice has been the regional roaming agreement, which entered into force on the 1st of July 2019,[96] significantly reducing roaming charges. As a next step, a roadmap for lowering roaming charges between the EU and Western Balkan countries has also been agreed.[97]

In the sector of heavy infrastructure, large strategic projects such as the Adriatic Ionian Corridor (AIC) and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) are being implemented within the connectivity agenda, often with controversy and heated public debate.[98] Some of the lessons learnt are that transparency is indispensable for the success of any connectivity project and that the connectivity agenda should be complemented by a regional framework promoting the rule of law and good governance.[99]

Despite the progress being made, the full potential of an interconnected region remains unexplored due to various factors. Firstly, governments' delay in undertaking the institutional, legal and trade reforms that facilitate development. As discussed further below, bureaucracy, inconsistency and corruption are issues that continue inhibiting progress in the region and discouraging investment.[100]

Secondly, the WB6 countries may claim that they are ready to take steps forward,[101] yet their policies are ambivalent when it comes to promoting economic growth.[102] The 16.6.2020 European Parliament Recommendation is a warning that 'growth in the Western Balkans is slowing down after a short-lived revival in investment in previous years, and that the contribution of investment and exports towards growth is fading'.[103] In this context, governments need to find more efficient ways to overcome de facto challenges evident in a region consisting of small emerging market economies, such as lack of competitiveness, limited fiscal space and constrained access to financing.[104] [105] According to the latest report of the International Monetary Fund (2020), the Western Balkan region 'has not fully availed itself of this driver of growth and convergence' and continues exhibiting 'a lack of openness, reliance on

low-value products, and weak competitiveness', factors which 'largely explain the insignificant role of trade and exports in the region's economic performance'.[106] The WB6 should reinforce their efforts to provide incentives for investments, in which a deceleration is expected as a consequence of the negative impact that the lockdown has had on enterprise revenues and supply chains, combined with the negative repercussions of the pandemic on the economies of the principal foreign investment actors.[107]

Thirdly, connectivity and growth are hindered by ongoing bilateral disputes. There is an obvious inconsistency in the geopolitics of the WB6 states: on the one hand, large and costly strategic projects are being designed to connect the WB6 countries by reducing travel time and on the other hand, governments sabotage each other by imposing new barriers discouraging business and tourism.[108] The ongoing debate over the 100% tariff on Serbian products by Kosovar authorities is a characteristic case of incongruent political stances.[109] Another example of this 'multi-level game' is the refusal of the Serbian state-owned company EPS to recognise Kosovo sovereignty on its electricity network.[110]

The European Parliament briefing of February 2019 notes that 'Not only does Serbia refuse to recognise Kosovo but it has actively lobbied against Kosovo's recognition by other countries. In 2018, the Serbian Foreign Ministry claimed that it had convinced 12 countries to withdraw their recognition, although this claim has been disputed by Kosovo. Serbia also succeeded in blocking Kosovo's bids to join UNESCO and Interpol.'[111]

Furthermore, heated debates over the dangerous idea of land-swap between Serbia and Kosovo, rather than serving the idea of connectivity, generate, instead, deeper division and a rise in nationalist rhetoric. Finally, the drawing of new borders in the Balkans would legitimise existing aspirations to create new, ethnically clean states.[112] In the past, such aspirations have mostly ended in bloodshed.[113]

The movement of WB6 citizens inside the region continues to be challenging due to passport restrictions, as in the case of travelling between Kosovo and Serbia, and BiH and Kosovo. Governments need to understand that roads,[114] tunnels and railways will not serve WB6 countries fully unless provisions are facilitating the free movement of people, goods and services inside the region.

While it is possible to a certain extent to measure the technical and economic progress made within the connectivity agenda by measuring the number of infrastructural development projects completed and treaties signed, it is extremely difficult to evaluate change from a social perspective. As it has been repeatedly stated in documents and official speeches, the success of the connectivity agenda relies on creating synergies, not only on a governmental and institutional level but also on people-to-people level, strengthening connections and cultivating values and attitudes that will allow true connectivity.

Despite these challenges, the progress made during the past years regarding people-to-people contact, manifested mainly in the youth sector,[115] shows that one of the biggest achievements of the Berlin Process is 'soft connectivity'. Ambitious infrastructure projects and economic welfare can only be viable in strong and prosperous societies, governed by rule of law and democratic principles. Unity among the region is vital and should be achieved through honest dialogue and critical reflection. In this endeavour, the role of empowered youth and strong civil society is also crucial, as suggested by the outcomes of the Zagreb Summit in 2020 and the subsequent European Parliament Recommendation.[116]

Security and the fight against crime and terrorism

Security and the joint fight against organised crime is one of the priorities of the regional cooperation agenda. In the last two years, the WB6 have made progress with regards to security-related reforms.[117]

In the London Summit,[118] the WB6 countries signed the Joint Declaration on the Principles of Information-Exchange in the field of Law Enforcement, and also endorsed the Roadmap[119] for a sustainable solution to the illegal possession, misuse and trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons

(SALW) and their ammunition in the Western Balkans.[120] The long-term agenda of the Roadmap foresees that by 2023 the contracting parties will have fully harmonised their national arms control legislation with the EU legal framework, taking into account parallel international agreements/standards. The goal is that within the next four years the WB6 countries will have ensured efficient, strong and compatible legal frameworks for arms control across the WB, with clear provisions for direct and effective operational cooperation.

Reforms, however, seem to be moving at a slow pace, as suggested by the EC 2019 report, urging WB6 governments to 'ensure better and concrete results in the joint fight against firearms trafficking'. According to the same report, 'Western Balkans partners' national legislation has generally been brought in line with EU law but the revision of the Firearms Directive and its implementing measures requires partners to make legislative amendments, especially on the standards for deactivation and marking of firearms'.[121] It also notes that the region lacks a clear and effective action plan focused on tangible deliverables, featuring country-specific operational objectives, more detailed performance indicators, as well as a clear steering and budgetary structure. On the ground, inadequacies and shortcomings have been observed in border checks between Western Balkan countries.[122] Technologies in the field of forensics seem to vary significantly from country to country, whereas, lack of concrete monitoring schemes and systematic research impede the gathering of clear information. Harmonised data collection on firearms seizures in particular, continue to be one of the 'stumbling blocks both in the EU and in the Western Balkans'.[123]

The European Commission report suggests that the Roadmap should be viewed as a comprehensive guide for future policy in the region. A solid legal framework, in combination with a coordinated regional strategy for the prevention and countering of organised crime in the WB can contribute significantly to peace and security.

There is an impression however, that WB6 countries take certain steps showing the spirit of good cooperation in an attempt to 'please Brussels' but without genuine intention to address the security concerns in the region.[124] The WB6 governments are yet to deliver on their security commitments[125] and carry out the legal and institutional reforms that they have agreed to. Regional cooperation in the field of security is also being hindered by entrenched social tendencies, such as reciprocal mistrust among WB6 societies, post-conflict trauma, as well as an adherence to an obsolete mentality of opting for 'alliances' with counterparts of shared linguistic, ethnic and cultural bonds.[126] Ongoing political instability in the region is also taking its toll.

Anti-corruption pledges

In the London Summit, the Western Balkans governments took pledges to address corruption.[127] Five WB6 countries, namely, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Montenegro, signed anti-corruption pledges. Serbia joined the cause in 2019.

Each country signed an anti-corruption agreement, according to which they pledge to expose and punish corruption in all sectors: public or private partnerships, public procurement and open contracting, tax, beneficial ownership, etc. The governments committed to supporting schemes such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. By signing the pledge, WB6 governments bind themselves to enhance institutional integrity, media credibility and anti-corruption education. It is expected of them to show a spirit of cooperation with the international oranisations that will be supporting and monitoring the process. Full implementation of all Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) recommendations promptly is a prerequisite.

The Berlin Process anti-corruption pledges highlight the importance of addressing this plague through a cross-sectorial, bottom-up approach, a tendency which has, generally, not been the case in the region, where 'anticorruption initiatives and institutional solutions have typically been top-down efforts

based on templates recommended by international actors'.[128] In this context, whistle-blowers, civil society and ordinary citizens have been identified as important actors for the success of this endeavour within the Berlin Process. WB6 governments have agreed to encourage citizens and employees to report corruption and promote action including by law enforcement on the information provided. They pledged to protect whistle-blowers, who take personal risks to provide critical information, and to work constructively with CSOs in research, monitoring or reporting of misdeeds, implementing anti-corruption education and outreach programmes engaging organisations in the public and private sector, as well as in talks and dialogues on preventive measures. The WB6 governments committed to ensuring that their local media can report on corruption issues objectively and independently.

Environment and Energy

Taking action on mitigating environmental pollution has been viewed as an urgent priority in a region suffering from high levels of air pollution and water and soil contamination.[129] In the Summit discussions, the WB6 governments had expressed their willingness to launch national strategies, consisting of concise steps, that would gradually allow their countries to transition to greener forms of energy. One of the pledges taken is to reduce the WB6 countries' dependency on coal, within the framework of the EU Just Transition policy for coal mine regions in the Western Balkans.[130]

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) has been financing large-scale renewable energy projects providing alternative energy sources to traditional coal, and modernising district heating networks across the region.[131] Some of the most notable projects supported are the following:

In Albania, the modernisation of Korporata Elektroenergjetike Shqiptare (KESH). In Kosovo, the Kitka and Bajgora wind farms. In Montenegro, the Krnovo wind farm, the first private wind farm in the country and at the time of financial close also the first private wind farm in the WB region. In North Macedonia, ESM and in Serbia, the 158MW Čibuk wind farm in Dolovo; as well as the Kovacica wind farm.

There are also various other smaller scale good practices that offer a promising outlook.[132]

Despite the region's potential, green energy production is not being fully explored.[133] Solar energy and wind power remain underdeveloped sectors, whereas there have been reported cases of arbitrary intervention in natural landscapes to the expense of the local ecosystem and inhabitants' welfare, as in the case of the controversial construction project in mountain Sharr, at a river potent of providing hydroelectric power.[134]

WB6 states keep using, to a large extent, coal power plants, having as the main argument the high cost of green investments. According to research conducted recently by the 'CEE Bankwatch Network'[135], governments in the region are failing to deliver on their promises to abide by pollution control requirements for large combustion plants'.

In the previous years, various WB6 capitals had won the title of the most polluted capital in Europe. Lamentably, this trend remains until today. On March 27, 2020, in the heart of the pandemic and with traffic in the streets paralysed due to the quarantine measures, Belgrade was classified as the most polluted city in the world.[136]

The COVID-19 outbreak further exposed the effects of pollution on citizens' health. According to the BiEPAG report on the impact of the global pandemic on the Western Balkans, citizens living in contaminated areas have proven to be more prone to developing serious or even fatal health conditions, stemming from respiratory problems connected to the air pollution generated by old and inefficient power plants.[137]

Amidst this gloomy situation, the news about EU's decision to support Green Diplomacy in the Region has been a ray of hope. Following upon the pledge to prepare a Green Agenda for Western Balkans, as stated in the Chair's Conclusions of the Poznań Summit, concrete steps were made within the 5th Energy and Climate Committee meeting, which was organized online by the Energy Community Secretariat.[138]

Research and Innovation in the service of Regional Economy

Even though we observe concrete steps being taken towards enhancing Research & Innovation, it is still an area where significant improvement is needed, particularly with regards to forging stronger connections between research and the private sector. Although there are numerous documents available (reports, press releases etc) referring to previous years, recent and updated sources are scarce. The 5th edition of the Balkan Barometer launched in June 2020 by the Regional Cooperation Council provides a general overview over the progress in the Region and its EU orientation[139], yet, documents available on research infrastructure refer mainly to 2018. This can be interpreted as an illustration of the short-lived motivation exhibited by the WB6 countries right after the London Summit. During the Summit, WB6 leaders appeared willing to support the development of policies granting access to researchers from the region into existing research infrastructures (RIs) and to cooperate with each other to develop national R&I Roadmaps which would form the basis for a regional map of R&I.

As the World Economic Forum findings suggest, 'innovation funds have been successful but they are still too fragmented to have the necessary scale'.[140] The Region could benefit from making good use of Research & Innovation to encourage entrepreneurship and prevent brain drain, notably by supporting SMEs, which are seen as promising actors for the future of the WB6 economies.[141] SMEs in the Western Balkans make up 99% of all firms, producing approximately 65% of total business sector value-added and account for 73% of total business sector employment.[142] The EU has committed to supporting SMEs experiencing severe cash-flow problems as a result of the pandemic with a financial package.[143] [144]

Especially in the aftermath of the pandemic, the WB6 could benefit greatly from funds for targeted research missions creating new and more sustainable pathways for growth.[145]

Towards this direction, a joint project that the WB6 leaders agreed to support in the Poznań Summit, but has remained mainly on paper, is the launch of the Regional Research Cooperation Hub, a platform aspiring to enable networking and the establishment of constructive synergies among researchers. The project includes the creation of a regional research infrastructure map and the completion of regional open-access protocols to research infrastructure.[146] These services initially aspired to be available in time for the next Western Balkan Summit, in 2020, but plans have been put on hold.

Research and innovation go hand in hand with digitalisation.[147] One of the points discussed at the 2020 Zagreb Summit is the need to accelerate the implementation of the digital agenda for the Western Balkans[148] and to bring the benefits of the digital transformation to citizens faster.[149]

The immense possibilities that a digitally connected region could offer to its people became even more evident during the lockdown when the WB6 citizens relied on the digital world more than ever before for working, studying, communicating and performing transactions online. This development also led to WB6 citizens growing more aware of their 'digital rights' and the regional civil society has been a frontrunner in educating the public about 'digital freedom'.[150]

Summarising, it is essential that the WB6 governments deliver on their promises to support mobility, exchange of information and the creation of synergies with partners inside and outside the Region, as well as to exhibit tangible progress in the following domains[151]:

(i).   the use of smart specialisation tools, methods and approaches to design and implement innovation strategies;

(ii).   vocational training and specialisation oriented to the current needs of global and digitalised markets;

(iii).   conducting capacity-building activities aimed at technology transfer, through specialised training courses, thematic workshops, vocational training on tools and resources specifically designed to assist the academic institutions in the regional economies;

(iv).   support to transnational synergies in the context of EU macro-regional strategies;

(v).   investment in data quality enhancement.

Civil society

The inclusion of the Civil Society Forum in 2018 as an integral part of the annual Summits, complemented by the official inauguration of CSOs as partners in the region for all the national, regional and European stakeholders was a major step which recognised the paramount role of civil society in promoting the objectives of the Process.

The creation and development of the Civil Society Platform for Democracy and Human Rights (CSP)[152] is proof of the potential of citizens and civil society to promote social change in the Region, respond critically to nationalist narratives of division, and build bridges of cooperation, especially in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic[153].

The inclusion of civil society in the Berlin Process is something to be celebrated. However, it should be mentioned that presence of civil society was, at least in the beginning, somewhat decorative. The Vienna Summit, for instance, featured civil society representatives in a tokenistic role. Progress had been made by the London Summit, where CSOs had a more substantial role, although they did not get much interaction with political leaders. In Poznań, CSOs had a continuous and more active presence.

Both the London and the Poznań Summits consolidated the role of civil society in the promotion of Reconciliation by addressing underlying bilateral issues causing dispute and discouraging dialogue, and actively supporting youth cooperation in the region through activities not only targeting youth but also led by youth.

The biggest achievement of the Berlin Process with regards to the regional civil society, has not been to just include CSOs in the dialogue, but rather to *unite* them under one cause. It is a frequent phenomenon to see CSOs in the WB divided: competing for funding instead of cooperating, sharing information only within their networks, and limiting their work to certain topics and geographies, especially if these are more prone to be approved by donors. CSOs are adjusting to a hard reality that does not offer them alternative options. Civil society in the Western Balkans is facing several serious challenges, such as a shrinking civic space,[154] limited capacity and resources [155], donor-driven work within short-term international projects, often defining CSOs' survival. Criticism or suspicion towards the CSOs' role and work, and all the adversities that stem from engaging in difficult tasks such as monitoring, raising awareness or even fighting corruption and organised crime further hinder their work.[156] A vital part of CSOs' activity consists of youth work, usually at a grass-roots level. Nevertheless, youth work in the WB is generally not officially recognised as an academic branch or profession. People conducting grassroots youth work are either working under another title (social worker, consultant, pedagogue etc) or are working as volunteers, usually unregistered and unpaid.

Civil society in the WB is at times viewed as a separate sector, detached from the state and the formal education system. The main reason is that its voice echoes bitter truths and challenges rigid stereotypes and entrenched habits.[157] CSOs in the WB often diversify their tactics to draw attention to deficiencies, misdeeds or potential threats. They become whistle-blowers, watchdogs, citizens' advocates, exposing misdemeanours by pointing the finger at people and institutions. This is not an easy task. There are many cases where activists in the Region have been harassed, falsely accused, or intimidated by the authorities and other powerful individuals.[158]

As suggested by the experts interviewed for this research, in combination with the findings of the latest regional policy brief,[159] CSOs would be more effective if firstly, their projects were long-term, so that they can have a measurable effect; secondly, their activities were not donor-driven, but independent both financially and ideologically; thirdly, if there was a cross-sectoral approach in place, whereby CSOs would work with local authorities and educational institutions, reporting to the relevant governments and institutions involved. In this way, youth work would stand a chance of being translated into youth policy.

Reconciliation

The vision of reconciliation has always been present in the background of the Berlin Process, often insinuated as a presupposition for the consolidation of sustainable regional cooperation. Reconciliation has been 'the elephant in the room', vocally uttered in the London Summit, when discussions revolved around topics such as the fate of missing persons, transitional justice, or tolerance to crime.

Reconciliation is a 'loaded' term, open to several interpretations. Interviewees state that the reconciliation agenda within the Berlin Process has been too vague and obscure to the people directly involved. This is attributed to the fact that there has never been a clear methodology within the Process on how to address and overcome root causes related to history, memory and trauma. These obstacles to the accomplishment of cooperation and interconnection remain to be overcome.

The efforts made by Greece and North Macedonia could serve as an example for other countries of the region frozen in conflict. The Prespa Agreement between Greece and North Macedonia was one of the highlights of the Berlin Process, resolving a long-standing dispute over the latter's name. The agreement was signed on 12 June 2018, on the banks of Lake Prespa, uniting three countries: Albania, Greece, and North Macedonia.

Ever since the signing of the agreement, the two countries have exhibited progress by taking steps to foster regional cooperation in the fields of economy, business, investment, R&I, transport, commerce and energy. Findings of research conducted within the synergy of ELIAMEP (Greece) and Analytica (North Macedonia) suggest that 'there is an overwhelmingly positive disposition in stakeholders from both countries when it comes to the need for furthering and strengthening cooperation'.[160]

Connectivity and mobility have been further improved by re-establishing flights between the capitals Skopje in North Macedonia and Athens in Greece, operated by Aegean Air, almost one decade after air transport between the two capitals had stopped due to the dispute caused by the then-naming of the Skopje airport 'Alexander the Great'. North Macedonia changed not only the name of its airport, but also the name of the highway connecting it with Greece on the border of Gevgelija, which was symbolically renamed 'Highway of Friendship'. The Prespa agreement is significant, as it paved the way for North Macedonia to re-start negotiations for EU and NATO membership. North Macedonia became a NATO member in March 2020.

Further institutional and technical reforms to support regional cooperation and connectivity between the two countries are on the way. Nevertheless, the most challenging part of the Prespa agreement, which will probably need time and systematic bilateral efforts before producing sustainable results,

is the aspect of Reconciliation. The success of the agreement at a social level lies in building bridges between the people of the two countries by investing substantially in the fields of research, education, culture and the civil society, as specified under the Prespa Agreement.[161] The official establishment of BYCO (Bilateral Youth Cooperation Office) in January 2020[162] has been a ray of hope for the future of the countries' bilateral relations by empowering youth and civil society. It will be interesting to see if the Greek government will proceed into the steps that the North Macedonian side has already taken, establishing a local office and a follow-up agenda.

Soon after the signing of the Prespa agreement, in September 2018, a separate, Joint Inter-Disciplinary Committee of Experts on historic, archaeological and educational matters was established. The principal task of this body is to revise school textbooks, maps and teaching guides to ensure that no school textbook or auxiliary material contains any irredentist/revisionist references.[163]

North Macedonia has taken similar steps to normalise its relations with another EU-member, Bulgaria[164] attempting to solve a long dispute over the 'Macedonian' language and ethnicity. The process involves discussions to find ways to investigate and revise controversial issues of language, religion and identity.

It is open to question whether the rest of the WB countries are ready to follow the example of North Macedonia. The tragedies of the 1990s are still open for many people in the region, especially the ones with missing relatives or suffering the long-term effects of war and trauma. According to the figures provided by the International Center for Transitional Justice,[165] an approximately 140,000 people were killed and almost 4 million displaced during the wars. Rape and torture were among the notorious tools used for ethnic cleansing.[166] Political leaders have often misused people's pain and confusion to consolidate their nationalistic narrative of division and achieve more power and influence. Stereotypes and misconceptions over neighbouring nations pass on from generation to generation, poisoning young people with invisible threats and 'enemies, employing a distorted view of reality to communicate certain misconceptions they cultivate a collective 'tradition' or 'legacy', defining one's patriotism, morality and honour.[167] [168] [169] It is in the younger generation, however, that the Berlin Process has set its hopes for reconciliation.

Youth Policy and Youthwork

Important steps had been taken before the London and Poznań Summits to promote regional cooperation via young people, among which the "Positive Agenda for the Youth of the Western Balkans", initiated by Slovenia at the Brdo Summit in 2015 and reconfirmed by the Vienna Summit in 2015. Concrete recommendations to support the youth sector were drafted at the Western Balkans Youth Conference "Connecting Youth" in Paris on 4th July 2016, which preceded the Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Western Balkans.[170] Certainly, one of the most promising success stories has been the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) in 2016. Opportunities for youth in the WB to travel, network, improve their skills and meet people all over the world via funded programs have been provided by the Erasmus Plus project of the European Union and other institutions and donors, such as the Youth Department of the Council of Europe, SALTO, FES, and USAID among others.

The Action Plan on Youth Policy created within the Berlin Process aspired on the one hand to foster the role of youth and youth work in promoting peace, stability and cooperation in the region, and on the other hand to start a meaningful dialogue among young people all over Europe. This dialogue is based on shared European values such as democracy, rule of law and the respect of human rights. In this context, various youth initiatives connected with the Berlin process continue being realised.

Most pieces of research and analysis conducted within the Berlin Process focus exclusively on the perspectives of the leaders involved. In May 2018, a few months before the London Summit, the EU-Western Balkans Youth Summit took place in Podgorica. Young activists and policymakers sat on

the same table with WB6 political leaders and representatives of EU institutions to discuss their vision of the Berlin Process, by focusing specifically on reconciliation and regional cooperation through education, research and youth policy. Looking at the participants' message to the policymakers, European institutions and the youth work field, one of the key ideas reflected is the need for an *equal* relationship between Europe and the Western Balkans[171], based on solidarity and mutual respect of each other's history and cultural uniqueness.

It is often difficult to assess the quality and effect of youth projects in the Region due to factors, such as lack of visibility, limited or distorted dissemination of results, as well as different understandings of what constitutes youth participation or youth work.[172] When the discussion comes to European integration and adoption of EU values at a societal level, figures indicate that "although the number of projects linked with the Berlin process is on the rise, the project activities and exchanges are taking place mainly within the region".[173]

Building on a 'Better Region Starting With Youth'[174]: the work of RYCO

After the London Summit, the WB6 countries renewed their commitment to support RYCO, and in the next months proceeded to deliver on their promise. The local RYCO branch in Skopje was inaugurated shortly after the London Summit. The WB6 countries (each country according to its share), continued financially supporting RYCO. Using these funds, supplemented with funds from international donors, RYCO implemented grass-roots and capacity building projects and seminars targeting and involving youth within the Region, in Europe, and beyond, such as the case of the study-visit in Japan.

In the past two years, RYCO has been affected by a series of unfortunate political and internal incidents, such as Serbia's ousting of its own Youth Representative in the Governing Board meeting in Prishtina in March 2019, chaired by Kosovo within the rotating presidency system. Political instability in countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, or the outbreak of the pandemic at the time when RYCO was preparing its agenda also proved to be a challenge. Despite adversities, RYCO is an organisation working systematically on reconciliation through youth mobility and intercultural dialogue, having recently launched close synergies not only with CSOs and activists but also with educational practitioners of the formal schooling system. Revising formal education is an aspect of reconciliation that needs further focus and improvement, mainly due to the difficulties of entering the formal schooling system, interfering with the teaching approach and the presence of ideological content in school curriculums. Investing further on capacity-building strategies with teachers and students in schools all over the Region, as it has been doing so far,[175] can facilitate in-depth, long-term change within the WB6 societies and pave the way for genuine reconciliation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Monitoring and visibility

Documenting the countries' progress with regards to pledges made in designated domains is a challenging task, mainly due to the absence of adequate and reliable monitoring mechanisms endorsed by all parties involved. Data is usually scattered among official documents and pieces of research/ analysis, making it hard to have a comprehensive and holistic view even in areas where progress could be measured by tangible results. Fragmented information can be retrieved in reports, press releases, policy briefs and other technical documents, found on the official Berlin Process website and in the websites of host countries or the respective organisations publishing the documents. Many of these texts represent exclusively the views of the author or the official stance of a country, which may be different than that of the EU or other WB6 countries. Further academic research on the progress of the Berlin Process would be beneficial.

In certain cases, the progress made cannot be depicted in figures, especially when it comes to evaluating *social change*. This is the case when measuring the countries' progress with regards to human rights, diversity, intercultural dialogue, peacebuilding or interaction with neighbouring countries, vital components of the regional cooperation and essential for the promotion of the so-called 'European values'. There is very vague information concerning how far the WB countries have progressed with regards to the adoption of the pillars of the acquis, as stated in both the London and Poznań Summit Chair's conclusions. This is probably due to the difficulty of measuring non-tangible goals connected with individual and collective change.

A concrete recommendation is for people and institutions involved in the Berlin Process to set up efficient monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Contracting parties should agree on when, how and by whom monitoring and evaluation will take place. Realistic projects with realistic goals should be the target and monitoring and evaluation should be continuous, happening before, during and after the process.

Along with a monitoring and evaluation framework to capture progress made, it is essential to guarantee better communication in-between Summits and meetings, to better inform the agenda for future Summits. So far, there is a lack of clarity on how the 'stocktaking' of each Summit takes place and how previous Summits inform the agendas of the forthcoming Summits. Better communication and visibility would be beneficial for the entire process.

Follow up and implementation

With regards to follow up actions, evidence shows that part of the recommendations agreed upon within declarations, usually the ones requiring rigid reforms and sacrifices,[176] remain only on paper. The remedy for this phenomenon is to adopt concrete and realistic plans of action, oriented to the standards of each country.

Commitment and responsibility

There are no legally binding provisions within the Berlin Process putting real pressure on governments to deliver on their promises. The offer of potential EU membership is no longer as effective as it was when the process was launched, when all partners had the enthusiasm to engage in a propitious endeavour. WB6 country representatives co-sign declarations featuring a list of recommendations in the form of a 'should-do' list, which have no clear follow-up plan or simply do not reflect the region's reality. Their countries' failure to perform would be attributed to several misfortunes or the EU not recognising the effort being made in the region.[177]

The non-binding nature of a declaration provides a margin for lack of follow-up action. Depending exclusively on the contracting parties' goodwill, it does not have the gravity of a legally binding agreement that could later hold governments accountable for not fulfilling their pledges. But then, it all comes down to a matter of principles and accountability. The example mentioned below is probably a fit illustration of what the 'European values' stand for, as explained by one of the experts interviewed:

> *In our context, if you get your Prime Minister to commit to a pledge, then it is exceedingly difficult to go back on that. It is a matter of values and it would mean losing face.*[178]

This phrase, uttered by a UK official, who happened to have a lived experience in the WB, and thus, insight to the regional culture, could be a starting point of how the EU could engage with its WB6 partners through the principles of intercultural dialogue, which are 'active listening' and 'learning from each other'. Nevertheless, whether conscious or not, the EU's stance towards the WB6 partners has been somewhat patronising or didactic[179] from the start of the Berlin Process. We come to this conclusion by looking at some characteristic features surrounding the Process: the setting of the WB meetings (reflecting EU standards and internal EU politics); the selection of countries to host the WB Summits, none of which has taken place in the WB so far, although this is about to change; the language used (ranging from the emphasis given to 'European values' as an infallible panacea for good deeds and successful partnerships, and the tone used when assessing the WB countries' progress, even when the latter have done well.[180]

Cohesion and coordination

If one looks at the WB Summits retrospectively as a sequence of interconnected events on a timeline aiming to a certain direction, it becomes evident that these events are neither of equal quality nor of analogous impact on the cumulative progress of the Process as a whole. In this sense, there have been oscillations in the dynamics of the Berlin Process.

The quality of each Summit has been largely dependent on the interests and priorities of each host country. Every Summit has either added a new topic or prioritised a certain area, reflecting the host country's foreign policy, national interests and relevance to the Region. France's focus had been on climate change and energy; Austria concentrated on connectivity; the UK, based on its experience in the region, prioritised security and re-opened the debate for missing persons, war crimes and reconciliation; whereas, economy and connectivity were on the top of the agenda introduced by Italy and Poland, with the first focusing on initiatives to boost investment and the latter exploring further the role of people-to-people diplomacy.

Consistency

At times, WB6 leaders' behaviour has been inconsistent, firstly, in respect of the pledges taken towards the EU, and secondly, concerning the way they have treated their neighbours throughout this shared journey. While the Berlin Process was at its peak, the WB6 governments proceeded into political actions that sabotaged each other's progress and divided the people. Consistency is a key factor in the success and viability of the Berlin Process. Both EU and WB6 leaders should exhibit their commitment with a genuine will and concrete actions.

To conclude, it remains pertinent for all stakeholders to bear in mind that the true impact of this initiative will only become visible in the future.

There have been many discussions on how to 'stretch' the Process or build upon its legacy. It is interesting also to see whether there will be a parliamentary dimension in the Berlin Process perspective. The next Summit will be hosted by Bulgaria and North Macedonia and this will hopefully foster a greater sense of ownership over the process for the Western Balkans.

Annex 1:
Research Methodology

The research is an initiative of the Balkan Forum, on behalf of the Civil Society Platform for Democracy and Human Rights. The platform is an independently organised regional consortium of 35 civil society actors in the six countries of the Western Balkans, working across borders and sectors, in support of each other and government, to co-develop the region united by a shared desire for peace and stability. Aspiring to be the 'institutional memory of the Berlin Process,'[181] an empowered citizens' movement building the social, political, and economic foundations of democratic societies based on human rights and rule of law, the CSP has committed to assuming greater responsibility for monitoring the Berlin Process agendas, holding the WB6 governments accountable for implementing recommendations from the Berlin Process Summits and meeting EU integration criteria. This research is one of the actions taken within the network's pledge to conduct ongoing assessments and evaluation of progress towards implementing the aforementioned commitments. It aims to map good practices, but also challenges and existing gaps, and use lessons learnt as a basis for the creation of new strategies and mechanisms, as foreseen by the Berlin Process Summit Recommendations.[182]

The largest part of the research has been based on a desk review of documents relevant to the Berlin Process, with a special focus on the outcomes and follow up of the London and Poznań Summits.

The research has taken into account institutional, social and geopolitical developments, feedback received by participants/experts involved in the process, as well as the framework defined in the policy and communication documents and materials related to the Berlin Process and the respective commitments of the WB countries involved. Given its timeline, the research was conducted before and during the COVID-19 crisis, thus commenting on the socio-political and economic impact of the pandemic.

It has also been complemented by 20 personal interviews with experts, stakeholders, politicians and researchers, as well as members of youth organisations and civil society networks, coming from the six countries of the Western Balkans and EU countries directly involved in the Western Balkan Summits. The outputs of the interviews have been enriched with findings coming from personal interaction of the author with interviewees in relevant EU-WB meetings, lived experience in the Region, as well as personal observation and informal discussions with participants in regional projects implemented within the Berlin Process.

The profile of interviewees covers a wide geographic span. Special attention has been given on maintaining a balance between the amount and quality of interviews conducted with experts coming from the six Western Balkan countries, and from countries that have either hosted Western Balkan Summits or have been meaningfully involved in the process.

Concerning gender balance, the domination of male interviewees justifies the recommendation to include more women in high-rank positions within the Berlin Process, something expressed by various people who contributed to the research.

In more specific terms, this report presents the key findings based on a desk review of documents relevant to the Berlin Process and from 20 theme-guided, semi-structured, and open in-depth interviews conducted from February to June 2020. The pandemic changed the course of the research during the period of the quarantine, shifting part of its focus on the new reality shaped in the Region through the crisis. Almost all interviews were conducted online, except for the few that took place before the lockdown. What is also interesting is that certain interviews were conducted twice, before

and during the COVID-19 crisis, providing useful insight on shifts in priorities and mentalities in the dawn of this new reality.

The interviews were confidential, as the research adhered to an academically acknowledged Code of Ethics.[183]

Every research has its limitations and people sometimes tend to provide 'politically correct' or 'socially acceptable' answers, especially when asked about issues connected with social values, history or politics (a phenomenon described by Timur Kuran as 'preference falsification'[184]). The general impression from the interviewees' input, however, has been that the interviewees involved have been very willing to share their experience and insight, even if this meant at times admitting that certain things could have been different.

Endnotes

1   Inspiring stories from the WB6 and all over the world can be found on the UNEP MGCY site developed by the WED 2020 youth task force. https://www.youthenvironment.org/wed2020 Regional representative for Europe: Eurobalkan Youth Forum, Thessaloniki (report to be published soon).

2   Indicative examples: Albania: The "GjejZa" project, where 16-Year-Old female students Have Set Up A Support Application For Domestic Violence Victims during lockdown: http://e-charity.gr/new/albania-gjejza-16-year-old-women-app-for-domestic-violence-victims/?fbclid=IwAR3mwakorZykCnOEriFV4y4JZlnQk-tsYaBfAKPwon49zdD-AaZs-91FFU0 Kosovo: the online group 'Vullnetarët/Volunteers #covid-19), counting over 11k members, created as an initiative of the oranisations 'Ta Pastrojmë Kosovën': https://www.facebook.com/groups/640172923219032

3   New for the WB6 region, yet alluding to the 'underground' youth work which emerged in the previous decade in Middle Eastern and African countries. See: Drosopulos, M. (2020). Change starts from the neighbourhood: a study on the results of 10 years of Euro-Arab Youth Cooperation, 2008-2018. Strasbourg/Budapest: Council of Europe. https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth-peace-dialogue/euro-arab-cooperation

4   Indicative examples: The United Nations Kosovo Team Blog for online activism in times of the pandemic entitled 'The (In)dependence of Western Balkans Youth: Mentality or Circumstance' https://unkt.org/2020/07/04/independence-western-balkans-youth-mentality-circumstance/?fbclid=IwAR0Ai_YYmCEmZUaZqBIb8YdEjc7aPh0tBZ0zlVc0hRf3rM8a5zN69LGf5ak

     North Macedonia: The UNICEF project entitled 'Youth Volunteers rise to the challenge of COVID-19', https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/stories/youth-volunteers-rise-challenge-covid-19

5   Indicative examples on the media: Baliu, D. (6.7.2020). 'Disgruntled Kosovars turn to North Macedonia for coronavirus tests'. Prishtina Insight. Available in: https://prishtinainsight.com/disgruntled-kosovars-turn-to-north-macedonia-for-coronavirus-tests-mag/

6   OECD 2020., The COVID-19 crisis in the Western Balkans: Economic impact, policy responses, and short-term sustainable solutions. South East Europe: OECD. Available in http://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-Response-Western-Balkans.pdf

7   Berger, V. Cirman, P., Dzhambazova, B., Lupu,C. Máriás, L., Prtorić, J., Radoja, Ž., Stojkovski, B., Zbytniewska, K. (authors), Edwards, M. (ed.) 2020., A LOCKDOWN FOR INDEPENDENT MEDIA? Effects of the COVID–19 pandemic on the press market and press freedom in

Central and Southeast Europe. Budapest: FES. https://www.fes-budapest.org/fileadmin/user_upload/dokumente/pdf-dateien/A_Lockdown_for_Independent_Media_Report_Final.pdf

8   A recent report issued by FES (June 2020) outlines the impact of the COVID–19 pandemic on the media landscape and press freedom in Central and Southeast Europe: https://www.fes-budapest.org/fileadmin/user_upload/dokumente/pdf-dateien/A_Lockdown_for_Independent_Media_Report_Final.pdf

9   Berger, V. Cirman, P., Dzhambazova, B., Lupu, C. Máriás, L., Prtorić, J., Radoja, Ž., Stojkovski, B., Zbytniewska, K. (authors), Edwards, M. (ed.) 2020., A LOCKDOWN FOR INDEPENDENT MEDIA? Effects of the COVID–19 pandemic on the press market and press freedom in Central and Southeast Europe. Budapest: FES. https://www.fes-budapest.org/fileadmin/user_upload/dokumente/pdf-dateien/A_Lockdown_for_Independent_Media_Report_Final.pdf

10   For an extensive analysis of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Western Balkans, see the BiEPAG 2020 policy brief: https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/BiEPAG-Policy-Brief-The-Western-Balkans-in-Times-of-the-Global-Pandemic.pdf

     Also, the latest OECD report about the impact of Covid-19 on local societies and the labor market: https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/en/

11   Salles 16.04.2020; Le Monde 01.04.2020https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/04/01/coronavirus-les-divisions-de-l-union-europeenne-la-placent-face-a-un-danger-mortel_6035118_3210.html

12   https://www.euractiv.com/section/eastern-europe/news/eu-announces-covid-19-help-for-balkans-eastern-neighbours-after-criticism/ https://www.bruegel.org/2020/06/has-covid-19-dented-the-eus-credibility-in-the-balkans/

13   Wunsch, N. 20.5.2020., 'How Covid-19 is deepening democratic backsliding and geopolitical competition in the Western Balkans.' London School of Economics. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/05/20/how-covid-19-is-deepening-democratic-backsliding-and-geopolitical-competition-in-the-western-balkans/

14   It is the very expression that Jean-Claude Juncker, then President of the European Commission had used to characterize Europe at his State of the Union address 'Time for Honesty, Unity and Solidarity' (2015): https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_15_5614

15   Teokarević, J., 2016. 'Modest progress towards a less desirable EU: European integration of the Western Balkans 2015-2016'. In Simurdić, M., Teokarević, J., Minić, J., Djukanović, D., Western Balkans Between Geography and Geopolitics. Policy paper 1/2016. Belgrade: FES. Available in https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/12677.pdf

16   As stated in the Final Declaration by the Chair of the
     Conference on the Western Balkans, Berlin, 28 August
     2014.
     https://berlinprocess.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/
     Final-Declaration-by-the-Chair-of-the-Conference-on-
     the-Western-Balkans.pdf

17   https://www.kryeministria.al/en/newsroom/news/
     historic-moment-for-the-common-future-of-the-
     western-balkans

18   El-Agraa, A. 2015. The European Union Illuminated: Its
     Nature, Importance and Future. Switzerland: Springer.

19   Fouéré, E. 2013. Macedonia-A country in crisis. CEPS
     Policy Brief, (299).

20   The Agreement for the creation of WBF was signed by
     the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of WB6, in November
     2015. The Fund became operational on October 1,
     2017, after the conclusion of the ratification procedures
     by all parliaments of its constitutive members. http://
     westernbalkansfund.org/about-us/

21   Interview with policy expert/journalist from the WB6
     https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/05/07/
     juncker-unfinished-job-regarding-concrete-eu-
     perspective-western-balkans/

22   https://balkaninsight.com/2018/07/09/london-set-to-
     host-western-balkans-leaders-07-07-2018/

23   A research and policy expert from the WB6, with whom
     we had a 1.5 hour long, in-depth, semi-structured
     interview.

24   Indicative sources: Madhi, G. (2019). 'Berlin Process
     before and after the Summit of Poznan'. Civil Society
     Forum of the Western Balkans. Available in: https://
     berlinprocess.info/op-eds/berlin-process-before-and-
     after-the-summit-of-poznan/ Last accessed: 8.7.2020;

     Bieber, F. (in The Economist 11.7.2018) https://www.
     economist.com/europe/2018/07/11/thanks-to-boris-
     johnson-a-farcical-west-balkan-summit-in-london

25   On the 9th of July 2018, Boris Johnson resigned as
     foreign secretary over Theresa May's Brexit policy.
     https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-44737667

26   For citizens of Kosovo, visas are required inside the
     Schengen zone, too.

27   One of the points discussed at the Regional Youth
     Forum in Novi Sad, in 2018, a few days before the
     London Summit, was the long procedure that the Kosovo
     delegation, in particular, had undergone in order to
     acquire visas. There was a feeling of disappointment on
     the first day of the Forum when some young members of
     the Kosovar civil society announced informally during
     the break that they could not attend the London Summit,
     as they had not been granted a visa in time for the
     Summit.

28   https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/05/17/ewb-
     interview-page-no-question-uks-withdrawing-western-
     balkans/

29   As stated in the official press release issued by the UK
     government, available in:
     https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/western-
     balkans-Summit-london-2018/about

30   The UK officials interviewed for the research do
     not necessarily endorse this opinion: one of them

characterised the UK's presence in the Region as
'discreet' and added that: it may seem that we are a bit
silent, but we are there… carrying on with our work and
monitoring progress.

31   As discussed in the interviews, the UK intends to fulfil
     this promise even in this new situation that has been
     formed ever since the COVID-19 outbreak. An option
     would be to direct part of these funds to prioritise
     needs and shortages that have emerged as a result of the
     pandemic.

32   Indicative examples: Poland was one of the 13 EU
     members, mostly from Central and Eastern Europe, to
     propose an initiative for the opening of negotiations
     with Skopje and Tirana in June, and the President of
     Poland, Andrzej Duda called the EU Member States
     to give a green light to Albania and North Macedonia.
     (source: Muminović, E., (06.07.2019). 'Poznań Summit
     highlights: What has marked the 2019 Berlin Process
     meeting?' European Western Balkans. Available in:
     https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/07/06/
     poznan-Summit-highlights-what-has-marked-the-2019-
     berlin-process-meeting/ Last accessed: 14.6.2020.

33   Quoting, here, one of the interviewees, who had in the
     recent past been a critic of the polish bid to host the
     Summit and a vocal sceptic towards the Berlin Process,
     as a whole. In the interview, however, he recognised
     Poland's efforts.

34   https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/
     uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/724295/
     Heads_Meeting_-_Chair_s_Conclusions.pdf

35   https://berlinprocess.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/
     chairs_conclusions.pdf

36   Interview with a policy expert from the Western Balkans,
     15.06.2020

37   See also: Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans:
     The Berlin Process and Visegrad Group in comparison
     project. Available in: https://idscs.org.mk/en/2019/03/06/
     regional-cooperation-in-the-western-balkans-the-berlin-
     process-and-visegrad-group-in-comparison-project/

38   https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-
     releases/2020/05/06/zagreb-declaration-6-may-2020/

39   https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43776/zagreb-
     declaration-en-06052020.pdf

40   Mujanović, J., 2018. Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of
     Democracy in the Balkans. London: Hurst & Co.

41   https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/
     IP_18_4396

42   https://berlinprocess.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/
     Joint-Declarations-signed-at-the-Leaders-Meeting-
     of-the-Western-Balkans-Summit-by-Berlin-Process-
     participants.pdf

43   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?u
     ri=CELEX:32018D1788&from=EN

44   https://berlinprocess.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/
     Chair%E2%80%99s-Conclusions-of-the-
     Heads%E2%80%99-meeting-of-the-London-Western-
     Balkans-Summit-10-July-2018.pdf

45   p.5 https://www.seesac.org/f/docs/publications-salw-
     control-roadmap/Regional-Roadmap-for-a-sustainable-
     solution-to-the.pdf

46   https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/publications-by-date.html

47   Kmezić, M., 2020. 'Rule of law and democracy in the Western Balkans: addressing the gap between policies and practice', Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 20:1, 183-198, DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2019.1706257

48   https://www.dw.com/bs/korupcija-ugro%C5%BEava-evropsku-budu%C4%87nost-balkana/a-51211971?fbclid=IwAR0rHn5xRTsjF3XZd9M5zaZrKEIS9c26MIA1Uz_qE2XNTeLG1w8pgvaY4EI

49   https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/publications-by-date.html

50   Regional Commission Tasked with Establishing the Facts about All Victims of War Crimes and Other Serious Human Rights Violations Committed on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia from 1 January 1991 to 31 December 2001.
https://www.recom.link/about-recom/what-is-recom/

51   (Kandić in European Western Balkans, 16.01.2018). https://berlinprocess.info/establishment-recom-important-region/

52   Balkan Insight (30.1.2018). https://balkaninsight.com/2018/01/29/recom-announces-state-forming-agreement-soon-01-29-2018/

European Western Balkans (21.05.2018) https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/05/21/brussels-victims-initiative-recom-part-berlin-process/

53   https://balkaninsight.com/2018/07/10/west-balkans-states-not-singing-recom-declaration-07-09-2018/

54   There was no development with regards to a declaration in Poland, either. In a recent interview (25.2.2020) published at the 'Koalicija za Rekom' official site, Pierre Mirel, Honorary Director General European Commission, referred to 'failed' attempts in both the London and Poznan Summit, emphasizing that, far by being a panacea, a declaration could at least be 'a small step for building up the process'. Available in: https://www.recom.link/ewb-interview-mirel-eu-needs-a-strong-financial-package-to-push-reforms-in-wb/

55   https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0168_EN.html

56   https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/document-library/declaration-on-recognition-of-academic-qualifications-in-the-western-balkans_en

57   https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/western-balkans-Summit-poznan-chairs-conclusions

58   https://www.funduszeeuropejskie.gov.pl/media/72874/agenda_Forum.pdf

59   "No further enlargement will take place over the next five years.", had said J. C. Juncker on the 10th September 2014. Speech available in: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_14_984 Some years, later, however, in 2017, in particular, he could confirm the importance in the long-term of EU enlargement to include the WB. This message to the WB governments had been characterized by the outgoing enlargement commissioner, Stefan Fule, as "a wrong message to the Western Balkans at a wrong time" (source: The Economist, 27.9.2014), available in: https://www.economist.com/europe/2014/09/27/in-the-queue

60   https://www.dw.com/bs/pariz-blokirao-albaniju-i-sjevernu-makedoniju/a-50851573 https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/11/14/north-macedonia-wont-be-joining-anytime-soon-did-eu-lose-its-peak-leverage/ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/10/25/france-is-pushing-eu-toward-strategic-disaster/

61   Mr Macron had also the support of the Netherlands and Denmark when it came to Albania.

62   https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/emmanuel-berretta/elargissement-de-l-ue-macron-fait-attendre-l-albanie-et-la-macedoine-18-10-2019-2341990_1897.php

63   https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/10/18/europe-union-warned-historic-mistake-emmanuel-macron-blocks/

64   https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/eu-western-balkans-relations_en.pdf

65   https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_519

66   To quote the words of MEP Ilhan Kyuchyuk, EP' standing rapporteur on North Macedonia and Renew Europe Group's vice coordinator in AFET Committee. https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/03/24/ep-groups-welcome-the-decision-to-open-accession-negotiations-with-n-macedonia-and-albania/

67   https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/18/eu-refusal-to-open-talks-with-albania-and-north-macedonia-condemned-as-historic-mistake

68   https://www.euractiv.com/section/eastern-europe/news/coronavirus-used-to-promote-anti-eu-narrative-in-balkans-report-finds/

69   '…The lack of solidarity among EU countries in the first weeks of the COVID-19 crisis response, the closing of borders that left many people stranded and the apparent lack of concern for the needs of the region dented the EU's image in the Balkans.' (Cameron, A. & Leigh, M. in Bruegel 15.06.2020). https://www.bruegel.org/2020/06/has-covid-19-dented-the-eus-credibility-in-the-balkans/

70   Shehaj, A., 20.4.2020. 'After the pandemic: perils and promise for the Western Balkans'. Balkan Insight. Available in: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/20/after-the-pandemic-perils-and-promise-for-western-balkans/

71   Kmezić, M., 2020. 'Rule of law and democracy in the Western Balkans: addressing the gap between policies and practice', Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 20:1, 183-198, DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2019.1706257

72   This is a topic that emerged almost in every interview conducted for this research. The pandemic crisis has facilitated the rise of authoritarianism in many parts of Europe, as is reflected on people's testimonies and the media: https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/31/viktor-orban-hungary-coronavirus-coup/ ; https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/03/pandemic-worsens-crisis-for-media-in-central-eastern-europe/ ; https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/03/31/covid-19-pandemic-as-a-threat-to-the-rule-of-law-in-the-western-balkans/

73   https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/BiEPAG-Policy-Brief-The-Western-Balkans-in-Times-of-the-Global-Pandemic.pdf

74   Wunsch, N., 20.5.2020. 'How Covid-19 is deepening democratic backsliding and geopolitical competition in the Western Balkans.' London School of Economics. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/05/20/how-covid-19-is-deepening-democratic-backsliding-and-geopolitical-competition-in-the-western-balkans/

75   Berger, V., Cirman, P., Dzhambazova, B., Lupu,C., Máriás, L., Prtorić, J., Radoja, Ž., Stojkovski, B., Zbytniewska, K. (authors), Edwards, M. (ed.), 2020. A LOCKDOWN FOR INDEPENDENT MEDIA? Effects of the COVID–19 pandemic on the press market and press freedom in Central and Southeast Europe. Budapest: FES. https://www.fes-budapest.org/fileadmin/user_upload/dokumente/pdf-dateien/A_Lockdown_for_Independent_Media_Report_Final.pdf

76   https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid-19-pandemic/

77   https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/coronavirus/

78   https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/sds-eu-cannot-leave-western-balkans-alone-cope-coronavirus

79   Shehaj, A. (20.4.2020). 'After the pandemic: perils and promise for the Western Balkans'. Balkan Insight. Available in: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/20/after-the-pandemic-perils-and-promise-for-western-balkans/

80   'The results showed a strong commitment toward EU accession - 59% - with a significant growth of more than 10% in support from civil society from since the previous edition. Trust in European institutions increased following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic'. https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/balkan-barometer-2020-2020-jun-26_en

81   Serbia is, in fact, the 4th largest recipient of Chinese foreign direct investment in Europe, according to the Financial Times: https://www.ft.com/content/748a96e4-7165-4a47-9c0a-9145a219f12b?accessToken=zwAAAXEMrDLAkc90ipbkcWVKR9OcCpFFohnxKw.MEUCIDkYgQe1ZBcmmnH1qMuEgAgNaxyznBBhems_Zt2ML0-EAiEA6KT8XHoM-hJvI_EWbyS3coA7HgTTEH75UcdQiyOZ5II&sharetype=gift%3Ftoken%3D8243a362-525b-48a6-955b-d9982f6e127a

82   https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/08/china-has-overtaken-russia-as-serbias-great-ally/

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84   Minić, J., 2017. 'April 2016 - The media image of the Western Balkans'. In Simurdić, M., Teokarević, J., Minić, J., Djukanović, D., Western Balkans Between Geography and Geopolitics. Policy paper 1/2016. Belgrade: FES. Available in: https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/12677.pdf

85   Nye, J. S. (10.7. 2015). 'The Limits of Chinese Soft Power'. Project Syndicate. Available: https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-civil-society-nationalism-soft-power-by-joseph-s--nye-2015-07?barrier=accesspaylog Last accessed: 9.7.2020.

86   https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/coronavirus_support_wb.pdf

87   https://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Roadmap.pdf

88   https://www.tap-ag.com/the-pipeline

89   https://berlinprocess.info/eu-will-grant-31-million-euros-for-corridor-vc-highway-in-bosnia-herzegovina/

90   According to research conducted by the author between 2018-2019 on 'Kosovar students in Greece', supported by KFOS, in a significant number of cases, the period between the application for a visa and an embassy's decision can vary significantly, taking a year or longer. Respondents have also shared that during visa-related interviews, they have felt offended or embarrassed by personal questions related to their motivation to travel outside their country, their social and economic status or intimate life. Drosopulos, M., 2018. 'Rethinking Regional Youth Work within the Context of the Berlin Process': follow up thoughts after the Second Europe-Western Balkans Youth Meeting. Ljubljana: SALTO South Eastern Europe. https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3854/Article%20Mary%20D%20proofread.pdf

91   Hackaj, A., 2018. 'The Berlin Process in the new enlargement strategy'. Euraktiv, 27 March 2018. Available in: https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/opinion/the-berlin-process-in-the-new-enlargement-strategy/ Last accessed: 9.7.2020.

92   Atoyan, R., Benedek, D., Cabezon, E., Miniane, J., Duy, N.N., Roaf, J., 2018. Public Infrastructure in the Western Balkans: Opportunities and Challenges. International Monetary Fund.

93   European Commission (2020b). EU Candidate Countries' & Potential Candidates' Economic Quarterly. Available: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/economy-finance/tp038_en.pdf

94   OECD 2020a. THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: Economic impact, policy responses, and short-term sustainable solutions. South East Europe: OECD. Available in: http://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-Response-Western-Balkans.pdf

95   https://www.ebrd.com/news/2018/regional-investment-platform-for-western-balkans-launched.html

96   European Commission (1.7.2019). Entry into force of the new Western Balkans regional roaming agreement: clear drop in roaming charges. Press Release. Available in: https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/entry-force-new-western-balkans-regional-roaming-agreement-clear-drop-roaming-charges

97   ibid.

98   As there have been accusations of mishandlings and heavy-handed tactics:

       https://exit.al/en/2018/10/08/the-trans-adriatic-pipeline-from-controversy-to-archaeology/

99   Hackaj, A. & Hackaj, K. (2019). Berlin Process: Implementation of Connectivity and Institutional Governance. Tirana: Cooperation and Development Institute.

Hackaj, A. (2018). 'The Berlin Process in the new enlargement strategy'. Euraktiv, 27 March 2018. Available in: https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/opinion/the-berlin-process-in-the-new-enlargement-strategy/ Last accessed: 9.7.2020.

100   IMF 2019. https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Departmental-Papers-PolicyPapers/Issues/2019/11/11/Lifting-Growth-in-the-Western-Balkans-The-Role-of-Global-Value-Chains-and-Services-Exports-46860

101   As voiced in the pledges taken, for instance.

102   IMF 2019. Lifting Growth in the Western Balkans The Role of Global Value Chains and Services Exports, Washington. DC: International Monetary Fund, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Departmental-Papers-Policy-Papers/Issues/2019/11/11/Lifting-Growth-in-the-Western-Balkans-The-Role-of-Global-Value-Chains-and-Services-Exports-46860

103   https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0168_EN.html

104   OECD 2020a. THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: Economic impact, policy responses, and short-term sustainable solutions. South East Europe: OECD. Available in: http://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-Response-Western-Balkans.pdf

105   Atoyan, R., Benedek, D., Cabezon, E., Miniane, J., Duy, N.N., Roaf, J., 2018. Public Infrastructure in the Western Balkans: Opportunities and Challenges. International Monetary Fund.

106   IMF 2019. Lifting Growth in the Western Balkans The Role of Global Value Chains and Services Exports, Washington. DC: International Monetary Fund, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Departmental-Papers-Policy-Papers/Issues/2019/11/11/Lifting-Growth-in-the-Western-Balkans-The-Role-of-Global-Value-Chains-and-Services-Exports-46860

107   OECD 2020a. THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: Economic impact, policy responses, and short-term sustainable solutions. South East Europe: OECD. Available in: http://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-Response-Western-Balkans.pdf

108   Hackaj, A. & Hackaj, K. (2019). Berlin Process: Implementation of Connectivity and Institutional Governance. Tirana: Cooperation and Development Institute.

109   Referring here to the 100% trade tariff that had been imposed by the Kosovo government on goods coming from Bosnia and Serbia in 2018. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46287975 In February 2020, the newly appointed Kosovar government led by Albin Kurti had announced that taxes on Serbian and Bosnian products will be replaced by reciprocity measures, a statement that had been received with doubt by the other sides: https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-lifts-serbia-tariffs-belgrade/30521305.html https://www.voanews.com/europe/kosovo-not-ready-lift-100-tariff-serbia-bosnia-goods

110   Dragojlov, A. 2020. 'Multi-level Games: The Serbian Government's Strategy towards Kosovo and the EU under the Progressive Party'. Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2020.1778985 Available in: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14683857.2020.1778985?scroll=top&needAccess=true

111   https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635512/EPRS_BRI(2019)635512_EN.pdf

112   https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/04/24/why-we-should-be-worried-about-the-fall-of-kosovos-government/

113   ibid.

114   A comment on the current state of road connections is enough to understand the touristic limitations of the region (which have deteriorated due to closed borders as a result of the pandemic, OECD 2020:6). Any ordinary tourist attempting to travel the Balkans will soon come to realize that their trip will be challenged by a number of factors: those who opt for public transport, will see that there are scarce or non-existent connections between cities, rare connections on Sundays and holidays, old and destroyed roads making even small distances hard to cover and obsolete means of transport, such as old buses or overcrowded shuttles.

115   https://berlinprocess.info/ryco-consults-over-300-young-people/

116   ['…to make sure that each step taken includes a substantial and comprehensive dialogue with civil society organisations, academia and youth from the early stage of decision-making to the implementation and evaluation phase, taking special care not to support or finance existing local anti-European power structures or local structures of dubious democratic reputation, and thereby fostering the development of EU values, the rule of law, the fight against corruption and the building of strong and efficient democratic institutions as the foundation for a successful accession to the EU…']. Available in:

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0168_EN.html

117   As stated in the Official Journal of the European Union (L 318/150, 10.12.2019): 'significant progress has been made in recent years in South-East Europe (SEE) in respect of enhancing arms control and countering illicit arms trafficking, not least because of sustained Union support. The SEE region, however, remains an area of concern and has been identified as a priority area in the EU Strategy against illicit firearms, small arms and light weapons (SALW) and their ammunition entitled 'Securing arms, protecting citizens' (the 'EU SALW Strategy')' https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019D2111&from=EN

118   The UK government has been delivering the pledges voiced at the London Summit and has continued its technical and financial support in capacity building, monitoring and/or research projects fostering security. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e21a08040f0b62c4a0b1314/707__Donor_mapping_Western_Balkans_security_and_justice.pdf

The UK's steady presence in the domain of security has been affirmed also throughout the interviews with the UK officials who contributed to the research. In its 9 June 2020 recommendation, the EP urges partners '…to sustain cooperation with the United Kingdom in the Western Balkans, taking into account the British ties with the region, as well as common objectives, from the advancement of the rule of law and fighting organised crime to counter-terrorism and other objectives and goals of CSDP missions'. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0168_EN.html

119 The implementation of the Roadmap by 2024 will facilitate further the efforts of the Western Balkans in meeting some of the key security conditions for full European Union Membership as set forth in the new EC Communication for "A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans'. The goals of the Roadmap agreed by the Western Balkans partners are consistent with the efforts within the Union and the United Nations (UN) to combat the trafficking of SALW and their ammunition: https://www.seesac.org/f/docs/News-SALW/Roadmap-for-sustainable-solution.pdf

120 Quoting the Official Journal of the European Union (10.12.2019): In order to address the remaining challenges relating to SALW control, further support the authorities in addressing these challenges and reinforce the commitment to combating illicit trafficking and misuse of SALW and firearms, a Roadmap for a sustainable solution to the illegal possession, misuse and trafficking of SALW and their ammunition in the Western Balkans by 2024 (the 'Roadmap') was adopted at the Western Balkans Summit in London on 10 July 2018. The Roadmap has seven goals covering all functional areas of arms control and envisions a Western Balkans which is a safer region and an exporter of security, where comprehensive and sustainable mechanisms, fully harmonised with EU standards and other international standards, are in place to identify, prevent, prosecute and control the illegal possession, misuse and trafficking of firearms, ammunition and explosives. The Union adopted in 2018 a Council Decision in support of the implementation of the Roadmap (Council Decision (CFSP) 2018/1788 (1)).

121 https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-security/20190627_com-2019-293-commission-report_en.pdf

122 […Although there is evidence that firearms travel across the Western Balkans, from and to the European Union, as recognised by all stakeholders and intelligence assessments, seizures rarely take place at border, but mostly inland. Several stakeholders also pointed out to shortcomings: border guards and customs officers do not sufficiently rely on risk profiling and prior intelligence; they are not specifically trained to detect firearms and not adequately equipped, and focus on border crossing points with no clear strategy to control the rest of the land borders used by smugglers.] (EC 27.6.2019:11).

123 ibid.

124 Emini, D. & Marku., D. 2019. Regional Security Cooperation in the Western Balkans. Skopje: Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis".

125 https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-security/20190627_com-2019-293-commission-report_en.pdf

126 Emini, D. & Marku., D. 2019. Regional Security Cooperation in the Western Balkans. Skopje: Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis".

127 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/western-balkans-anti-corruption-pledges

128 Hogić, N. & Elbasani, A., 28.3.2019. 'Whistle-blower Protection in Kosovo–An Unlikely Success Story of Civil Society Collective Action and International Support'. Global Anti-corruption blog. Available in: https://globalanticorruptionblog.com/2019/03/28/guest-post-whistleblower-protection-in-kosovo-an-unlikely-success-story-of-civil-society-collective-action-and-international-support/ Last accessed: 8.7.2020

129 Figures show the magnitude of the problem: In 2016, the region's 16 coal plants emitted more sulphur dioxide pollution than the rest of the coal plants in Europe combined. Total sulphur dioxide emissions for Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia were more than six times higher in 2018 than the ceiling agreed with the Energy Community. One power plant in Serbia, Kostolac B, single-handedly emits more SO2 than the total allowed for the four countries together (Euraktiv 11.12.2019). https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/opinion/coal-pollution-in-the-western-balkans-is-a-european-problem/

130 https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/initiatives/com-2020-22_en

131 https://www.ebrd.com/news/2020/greening-the-western-balkans-region.html

132 The coal-to-solar shift project in N. Macedonia is a good practice, presented here as an indicative example. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/small-biz/productline/power-generation/n-macedonia-wins-eu-praise-for-pioneering-coal-to-solar-shift/articleshow/74221906.cms

133 https://www.ebrd.com/news/2020/greening-the-western-balkans-region.html

134 It is one of the few cases where the civil society of different ethnic backgrounds have united and with the support of other local and international actors, have launched a multilingual campaign (Together for Sharr/Zajedno za Šaru/Bashkë për Sharrin) to stop the construction plan: https://mk.ambafrance.org/Se-bashku-per-Sharrin-se-bashku-drejt-yjeve https://www.new-perspektiva.com/sq/te-bashkuar-per-mbrojtjen-e-natyres/

135 https://bankwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/comply-or-close.pdf

136 http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a582617/Air-Visual-Belgrade-most-polluted-world-city.html#:~:text=Since%20Friday%20morning%2C%20Serbia%27s%20capital,the%20list%2C%20the%20website%20said.

137 https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/BiEPAG-Policy-Brief-The-Western-Balkans-in-Times-of-the-Global-Pandemic.pdf

138 https://balkangreenenergynews.com/eu-to-focus-on-green-deal-diplomacy-preparing-green-agenda-for-western-balkans/

139 https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/balkan-barometer-2020-2020-jun-26_en

140 https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/02/western-balkans-become-more-innovative/

141 The Regional SME Competitiveness Programme is one of the pillars of the Western Balkans Enterprise Development and Innovation Facility, a comprehensive financing platform combining loans and incentive grants to support SME growth: http://www.wbedif.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/WB_Edif_AR_2019.pdf

142 OECD 2019. SME Policy Index: Western Balkans and Turkey. Available in: https://www.oecd.org/publications/sme-policy-indexwestern-balkans-and-turkey-2019-g2g9fa9a-en.htm

143 https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news_corner/news/eu-and-ebrd-step-access-finance-smes-western-balkans_en

144 OECD 2020a. THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: Economic impact, policy responses, and short-term sustainable solutions. South East Europe: OECD. Available in: http://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-Response-Western-Balkans.pdf

145 https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/02/western-balkans-become-more-innovative/

146 https://www.eib.org/attachments/efs/infrastructure_investment_in_the_western_balkans_en.pdf

147 A follow-up project foreseen by the 2019 Summit, which failed to happen due to the coronavirus lockdown, was the hosting of the third Digital Summit in Tirana, Albania. The event, which had been planned for April 2020, would be co-organised by the Region, the EC, the RCC and business representatives. The aim of the Summit would be to promote the WB digital perspective in the context of EU integration, while drawing the Path Ahead in the Digital Agenda, in order to prioritize the key objectives for the region. It would cover 4 main platforms: Network & Services connectivity, Trust and security, Digital skills and Digital Economy. The Summit had to be postponed due to the outbreak of the pandemic and new dates are expected.

148 In 2018, the Commission together with the Ministers of the countries launched the Digital Agenda for the WB, a project aspiring to mobilize strategic investments and boost economic growth. The agenda featured a solid EU investment in broadband infrastructure; it aimed to strengthen cyber-security and trust and to promote the digitalisation of industry. Provisions were included within this initiative to offer young people from the Western Balkans extensive networking and training opportunities in the digital field.

149 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0168_EN.html

150 https://democracyendowment.eu/en/news/1603-protecting-digital-rights-in-the-western-balkans.html

151 Specified by combining previous RCC findings (2018:5) with output from interviews conducted within this research and attendance of 2020 regional fora

(Thessaloniki Regional Forum; EU-Western Balkans online Youth meeting etc.).

152 https://civilsocietyplatform.org/about-us/

153 https://www.thebalkanforum.org/en/joint-statement-by-cso-actors-from-the-western-balkans-on-covid-20

154 https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-releases/western-balkans-civil-society-forum-demands-renewed-impetus-eus-enlargement-policy

155 Beyond the Borders (2020). Regional Policy Brief. New age of reconciliation- Generation Z on the engine. Tirana: Beyond barriers association.

156 See also: https://globalinitiative.net/civil-society-western-balkans/

157 Recent findings published in the 2020 Beyond the Borders report: 'CSOs are providing peace building education to youth what is of the great interest for the peace building process taking into consideration that formal education system is not open for the multiple perspective history education as well as peacebuilding education and development of the critical thinking'. (2020:11)

158 https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2019/10/30/civil-society-needs-support-to-fight-corruption-and-organised-crime-in-the-western-balkans/

159 Beyond the Borders (2020). Regional Policy Brief. New age of reconciliation- Generation Z on the engine. Tirana: Beyond barriers association.

160 Armakolas, I., Kreci, V., Christidis, G., Paschalidis, P., Jusufi, I., 2019. Cooperation in Education, Culture and Civil Society After The Prespa Agreement: How to move forward. Athens / Skopje: Analytica, Skopje | Eliamep, Athens.

161 More specifically explained in the Action Plan on the intensification and enrichment of cooperation between the Hellenic Republic and the Republic of North Macedonia under cooperation priorities chapter six titled: Cooperation in the fields of education, science, culture, research, technology, health and sports.

162 https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/30410245.html

163 https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/news-announcements/establishment-of-the-joint-interdisciplinary-committee-of-experts-jice-between-greece-and-the-fyrom.html

164 https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/05/14/worrying-developments-on-bulgarian-north-macedonian-relations/

165 https://www.ictj.org/publication/transitional-justice-former-yugoslavia

Ongoing research conducted by The Humanitarian Law Center estimates that in the conflicts in the former Yugoslav republics at least 130,000 people were killed. https://web.archive.org/web/20110522141442/http://www.hlc-rdc.org/stranice/Linkovi-modula/About-us.en.html

166 Robson, A., 1993. 'Rape: Weapon of War'. New Internationalist. Issue 244. Available in: https://web.archive.org/web/20100817134853/http://www.newint.org/issue244/rape.htm Last accessed 10.7.2020

167 Reineck, J.S., 1991. The Past as Refuge: Gender, Migration, and Ideology Among the Kosova Albanians. Berkeley: University of California.

168 Schwandner-Sievers., S. 2008. "Albanians, Albanianism and the strategic subversion of stereotypes". Anthropological notebooks 14 (2):47-64. Slovene Anthropological Society.

169 Drosopulos, M., 2019. 'Kosovan students in Greece: challenging and changing stereotypes'. Building Knowledge About Kosovo: Local and International determinants of Kosovo's statehood. Prishtina: Kosovo Foundation for Open Society, pp.199-238. http://kfos.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/KFOS_Local-and-International-Determinants-of-Kosovo's-Statehood-WEB.pdf

170 Topalli, I., 2016. Connecting Youth Work and Youth Policy. Europe-Western Balkans Youth Meeting. Ljubljana: SALTO SEE. Available in https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3471/Report%20Europe-WB%20Youth%20Meeting.pdf Last accessed: 14.6.2020

171 https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/see/resources/berlinprocess/

172 Drosopulos, M., 2018. 'Rethinking Regional Youth Work within the Context of the Berlin Process': follow up thoughts after the Second Europe-Western Balkans Youth Meeting. Ljubljana: SALTO South Eastern Europe. https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3854/Article%20Mary%20D%20proofread.pdf

173 Beyond the Borders (2020).

174 This is the official RYCO slogan.

175 https://berlinprocess.info/ryco-and-unicef-strengthen-capacities-of-western-balkan-teachers/

176 Such as pledges to fight corruption and organised crime or promote reconciliation (all discussed before).

177 The following extract has been taken indicatively from the 'Democracy Plus' report for Kosovo entitled 'Commitments from the 'Berlin Process' on Rule of Law and Good Governance' (2019:4): On this journey to the European Union, Kosovo is behind all the other countries in our region. Also, due to the non-recognition of Kosovo's citizenship by five EU countries, the EU has shown a tendency to evaluate Kosovo more unfairly in the integration processes

178 Interview with one of the organisers of the London Summit, 12.6.2020

179 About the 'superiority' of Europe towards the 'inferior' Balkans. Fraenkel, E., 2016. 'The EU and the Western Balkans: Do They Share a Future?'. Barcelona Centre for International Affairs. https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionals/n1_145_the_eu_and_the_western_balkans_do_they_share_a_future/the_eu_and_the_western_balkans_do_they_share_a_future

180 Following the Council's decision to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, the following statement by the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen had been featured at the 25.3.2020 Press Release of the EU: "The European Union delivers on its promise. North Macedonia and Albania did what was asked of them and they have continued making progress in the reforms needed. Today marks the start of the journey to a bigger and stronger European Union. And this decision is in the European Union's geostrategic interest." The instance of the two WB countries being congratulated by the EU for following instructions coming from a higher authority, alludes to the image of a father or teacher praising a young child for behaving well. The rest of the statement is focused only on the EU and the positive outcomes that this development is expected to bear. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_519

181 https://civilsocietyplatform.org/about-us/

182 Referring here to both London and Poznań Summit conclusions.

183 https://www.lib.auth.gr/sites/default/files/docs_files/research_deontology_principles.pdf

184 Kuran, T., 1995. The inevitability of future revolutionary surprises. American Journal of Sociology, 100(6), pp.1528-1551.

About the Balkan Forum

The Balkan Forum works to create a new vision for the Balkan region. It is a regional, multisector platform designed to advance cross-border dialogue and create a shared regional vision and agenda for cooperative action in the Balkan region based on economic integration, prosperity, and sustainable peace. We adopt a positive approach as the guiding principle for our activities; rather than re-emphasizing the problems that have divided the Balkan populations for many years now, we focus heavily on the positive elements that unite them.

We highlight good practices of regional cooperation to policy discussions and promote existing efforts to connect grassroots initiatives, knowledge, and successes to the decision-making levels that are responsible for policymaking and regional and/or EU integration. Together with our partners we focus our efforts on filling gaps and mobilizing action; facilitating consensus building and dialogue; and building political will for policy action on regional cooperation initiatives.

Donor:

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