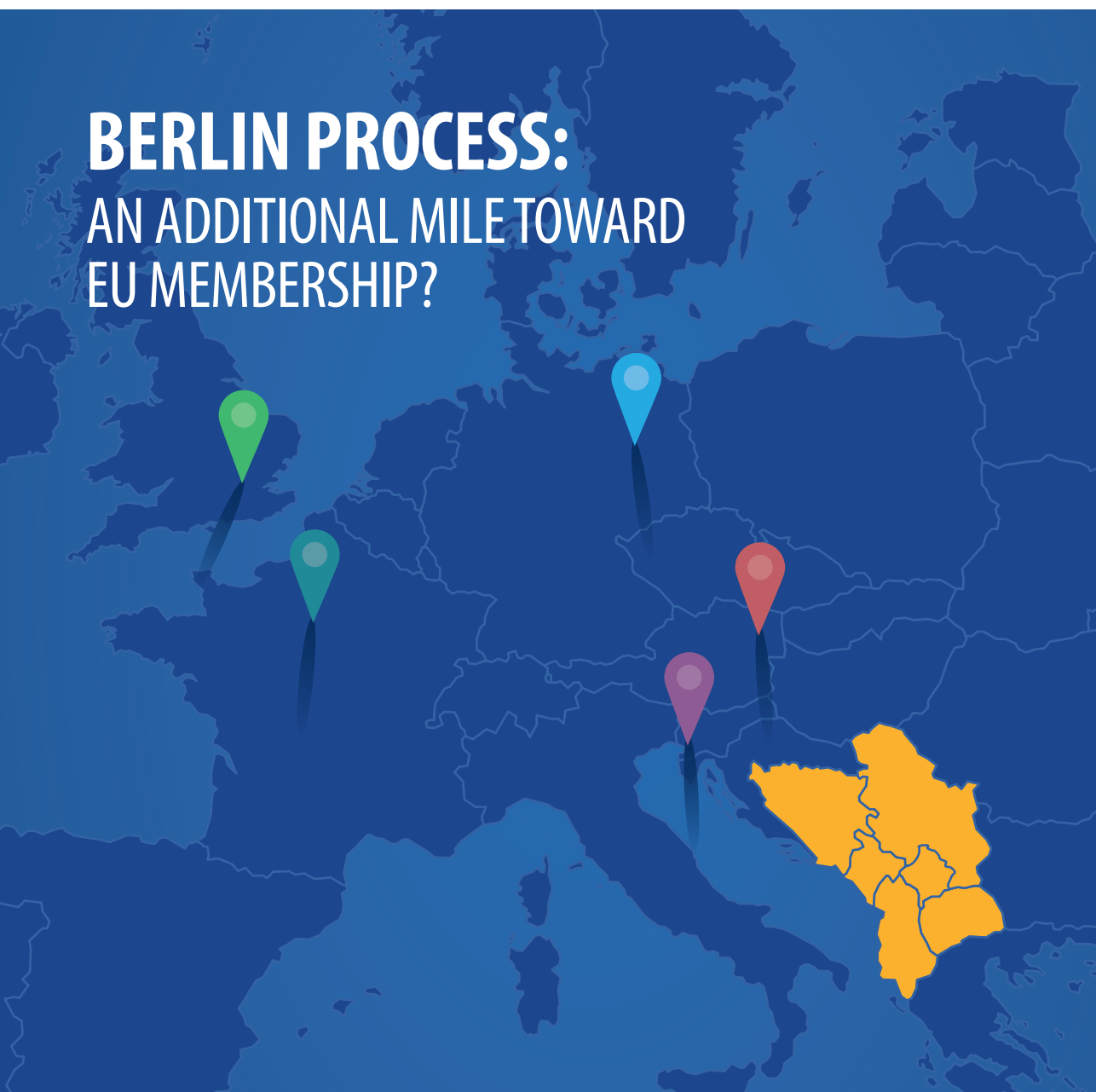




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BERLIN PROCESS: AN ADDITIONAL MILE TOWARD EU MEMBERSHIP?



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INTRODUCTION

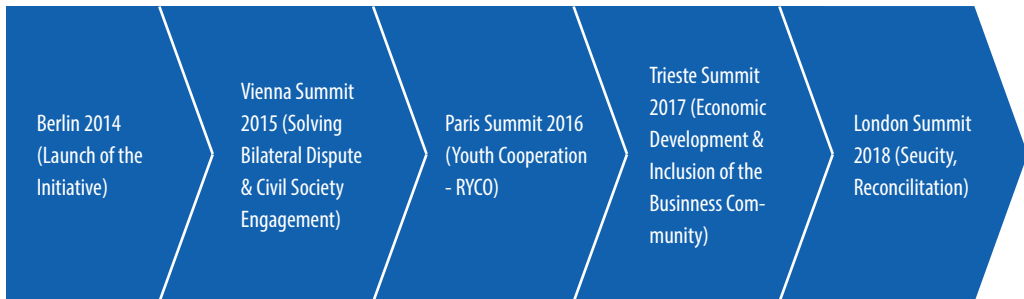
The Berlin Process of the Western Balkans (WB) has brought a new era of cooperation in the region. Launched in 2014 at the initiative of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the Berlin Process is conceived as a means for several European Union member states with keen interests in the Western Balkans to engage with the six aspiring Western Balkans countries.¹ The process seeks to keep the EU perspective for the region on the table while putting key EU member states in a mentorship role to steer the region through a transformation that would make it eligible for accession. The process advocates economic growth, increased cooperation and connectivity between the aspirant countries. Since its launch, the Berlin Process has become the only high-level platform of collaboration in the region. In addition, it represents the only high-level political platform that includes diverse stakeholders such as civil society and the business community.²

The Berlin Process sends a powerful symbolic message amid the fatigue of enlargement felt in all EU member states and the stalled reforms in the Western Balkans. The process as such enjoys the support of the region's political establishment and maintains the EU as a relevant actor and the EU membership as the strategic goal for the six aspiring Western Balkans countries. While the Berlin process is not a substitute for the enlargement process, it brought a new perspective and impetus to the overall enlargement. Moreover, it will also positively contribute to each country's EU agenda and it will maintain the momentum of the European integration in the Western Balkans.

But three years on, its symbolic meaning has yet to translate into tangible outcome. Connectivity and economic cooperation were the buzzwords of its summits. Themes ranging from connectivity, youth exchange, education and resolution of bilateral disputes were part of the high level political discussion. The London Summit in 2018 is expected to expand to include security challenges, and reconciliation. Yet, the majority of connectivity projects have not taken off and the few that have, such as the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), will take years of work before they are brought to fruition.

1 Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia

2 The EU has launched various bilateral and multilateral initiatives in the framework of the EU-Western Balkan relations. These initiatives aim to contribute to the overall EU agenda in the WB including the pursuit of the EU foreign and security policy, economic development and cooperation, investments, mobility, and solving bilateral issues in the region. To date there are around 90 initiatives launched in the Western Balkans – this includes all those of political and operational level.

Figure 1 Summits and discussed topics in the framework of the Berlin Process

With the Berlin Process' finalization looming over the horizon, the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies narrows down into the EU efforts and their manifestation on the ground in the Western Balkans to assess its achievements and shortcomings. The aim of this brief is to take a toll of the most laudable and comprehensive political initiative in the Western Balkans that engages a plethora of interlocutors and stakeholders. What has it accomplished? Has it opened up a tangible EU accession perspective for the region? Will this initiative continue in spite of EU's extended focus to deepen rather than enlarge the Union?

EU ENLARGEMENT FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS: INTEGRATION AT A SNAIL'S PACE

The EU's ambition to be the key factor of stability, reform, and democratization in the Western Balkans (WB) was voiced for the first time in 1991 in the speech delivered by Jacques Poos, the chair of the EC Foreign Affairs Council at the dawn of Yugoslavia's breakup.

"This is the hour of Europe—not the hour of the Americans.... If one problem can be solved by the Europeans, it is the Yugoslav problem. This is a European country and it is not up to the Americans. It is not up to anyone else. (Glaurdić, 2011)"

Three decades after this statement, the EU is still searching for its momentum. The "momentum" has been often lost throughout history or was mostly shared with the Americans. Notably, the "Yugoslav problem" and its bloody episode became the only issue that the EU could

not solve. Following the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, the situation called for a wider international involvement initially through the imposition of peace agreements between countries at war and later its transformation with the promise of the EU perspective (Beslin, 2017).

The EU perspective for the countries of the Western Balkans was officially launched during the EU - Western Balkans Thessaloniki Summit of 2003 when the agenda for EU's expansion in the region was backed by the European Commission (Commission, 2003). The Thessaloniki Summit went down in history as the first formal attempt to pave the way to Western Balkan countries to EU accession. Yet, keeping up with the Thessaloniki agenda and the promise of the further enlargement to include the region proved an elusive task mainly due to EU's inability to deal with the dynamics of the region, but also the lack of commitment by local political elites to engage in reforms and democratization of their countries (Fouéré, 2013, pp. 3-4).

The commitment to integrate the region in the EU was displayed at the bilateral level with each country³ but also through regional projects and intergovernmental initiatives mainly supported by the EU member states with a keen interest in the region⁴ (Flessenkemper, 2017). Nonetheless, the engagement in many fronts – being bilateral, inter-governmental level - has obscured the entire EU approach in the region. Scattered, lacking clearly defined objectives, without a well-coordinated agenda, actions, or a precise timeframe turned the whole EU approach in the Western Balkans into a course prone to misunderstandings that produced limited outcomes. The stalled reforms and the slow pace of democratization in Albania, Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Montenegro are corroborated by the country reports of the EU Commission launched annually.

The patchy rule of law, lack of delivery on the fight against corruption and a market still dominated by monopolies are the common denominator of the stagnation and regress in all six Western countries. This state of play and the subsequent political instability are the main indicators that demonstrate the lack of tangible outcomes from all the efforts made thus far in both bilateral and intergovernmental levels. The past year (2017) has shown that the region is still a fragile democracy marred by weak state institutions and erosion of democratic values for which the EU has invested years of efforts. This is also topped by the political disputes, such as contested statehood (Serbia and Kosovo) and border demarcation between the countries of the region, minority issues, name dispute (Greece and Macedonia) which often become the very stumbling blocks on the path to EU membership.

3 EU bilateral relations with WB countries following separate integration paths for each country

4 Similar to the Brdo-Brijuni Process, a meeting of this process has been used by the German Chancellor Angela Merkel to launch the idea of the “Berlin Process”.

Thus, from a rather ambitious objective of the Thessaloniki Summit to integrate the six Western Balkan countries to date only two countries - Serbia and Montenegro - are mentioned as serious potential candidates to join the EU⁵ in part because of the fears within the EU bureaucracy that any further delay in the accession process will turn push these countries in Russia's embrace and the belief that Serbia holds the key to stability in the region, in particular with Kosovo and Bosnia, despite evidence to the contrary. This approach is further strengthened in the EC President's Juncker "Letter of Intent" announcing plans to create the **New Enlargement Strategy for Western Balkans** (President Juncker's State of the Union address, 2017). This strategy is expected to be launched in February 2018, whereas the details of this document, and whether it will include the remaining four Western Balkans countries is yet to be seen (EU Official, 2018). The dilemmas over the content of this strategic document have already sparked unease among the Western Balkans countries, which remain weary of the future dynamics should Serbia find itself in the consensus-based Union by 2025. If singled out, the future of the four countries will be in flux: without an end date as an incentive will there be any political will to pursue EU membership or will the EU lose its clout in the region if the rest of the region will be left in limbo?

THE BERLIN PROCESS: AN EXTRA MILE IN THE EU INTEGRATION PROCESS?

The Berlin Process was initiated by Germany – one of the most vocal EU member state that embraces EU's enlargement process towards the Western Balkans, and was soon supported by Austria, France, and Italy. Launched in 2014 amidst multiple crises within the EU, with the refugee crisis being one of the most concerning among some EU member states, deepened the enlargement fatigue, the Berlin Process represents the only high-level political venue focused on the six aspiring Western Balkan countries. Initially, the initiative was time-limited; it was foreseen to take place in the course of four years (2014-2018) mainly through the hosting of annual EU-WB6 summits in different EU capitals/cities. Its aims were set to boost the EU agenda in three main areas: economic growth and connectivity, good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation, and civil society development and people-to-people connectivity. It also strove to include civil society in key discussions a goal that was reached only after

5 Montenegro and Serbia are considered as frontrunners in this process with perspective accession to the EU in 2025.

intense advocacy by the Civil Society Organizations' Forum of the Western Balkan Summit Series⁶. At a later stage, the Berlin Process involved the business community, such as during the Trieste Summit, when the regional economic development and interconnectivity were the main themes.

Despite the efforts to drum up support with the EU member states for the Berlin Process, the initiative fell short of the active involvement of EU member states vested in the stability of the region. The most glaring examples were the lack of buy-in from Romania, Bulgaria⁷ and Greece – some even with open or potential disputes in the region, the limited role played by Slovenia and Croatia contrary to the expectations given their lead in a similar cooperation scheme for the Western Balkans through the Brdo Brijuni Process and the lack of involvement of other EU member countries willing to support and guide the EU integration path for the six remaining countries (Flessenkemper, 2017). The support from the EU External Action Services has also been limited to the readiness to support some elements of the process such as the projects related to connectivity, regional cooperation and enhancing people to people contacts (Commission, 2017).

Yet, despite the lukewarm reaction that the initiative received from the rest of the EU member states and the cautious embrace by the EU bureaucracy, the overall objectives of the process are crafted carefully to fit into the EU agenda for the Western Balkans. Focused on concerns endemic to the region, the process has been developed so it can:

- a) enhance regional cooperation through the resolution of bilateral disputes;
- b) build connectivity in energy, infrastructure to boost economic development;
- c) cooperation between people – youth, civil society, businesses – building bridges in the region (Necev, Nicic, & Memeledzija, 2016).

These pillars were defined with the presumption that they would help to build resilience in the Western Balkans. However, to date, the results of the process are rather thin. Looking closely at the Berlin Process agenda it is clear that there is much at stake making it difficult - if

6 A platform of civil society activists from the region and within the EU organizing in parallel events with the political level summits in the framework of the Process

7 Bulgaria took over the EU Council Presidency in January 2018, one of the set priorities will be the WB countries and EU perspective. EU- WB Summit is expected to take place in May 2018, aiming to shift the discussion from crisis management to enlargement. These efforts might be later on included in the Berlin Process, as Bulgaria has shown interest to participate in the Process during the Trieste Summit.

not impossible - to tackle the regional challenges in such a short timeframe and in the intricate multilateral environment.

Another concern raised by BIEPAG experts is the selection of the annual topics and the lack of transparency during the summit preparations, which resulted in lack of tailored strategy to follow throughout the Process (BIEPAG, 2017). Such shortfalls affected the continuity and the consistency of the discussions, as well as effective implementation of commitments and projects discussed in each summit.

FROM BERLIN TO LONDON: BETWEEN MEETINGS, ISSUES AND COMMITMENTS

Aside from regional cooperation and interconnectivity, the Berlin Process emphasized the resolution of **bilateral issues** as an integral part of its work. Bilateral disputes represent one of the most sensitive bodies of complex issues in the framework of the process. The EU has put extensive efforts in solving bilateral disputes not solely to prepare the countries for accession, but to reach the long-sought stability while externalising the burden of its own security in other non-member countries (third countries). The fact that the countries in the region are retorting to nationalist narratives is an indicator that the resolution of bilateral disputes in the framework of the Berlin Process and other EU efforts failed to achieve its desired outcomes. The intergovernmental approach in solving deeply rooted problems in the Western Balkans appear to be far more complicated than those undertaken at the bilateral level.

In the eyes of the organizers, the efforts to solve bilateral disputes in the region reached the pinnacle of success during the Vienna Summit in 2015, the second summit shortly after the process was launched in Berlin. The joint Declaration on Bilateral Issues was signed by all participatory countries, a commitment to resolve all open questions in the spirit of good neighbourly relations and commitment to EU integration (EC E. C., 2015). Yet, much of it remained on paper as the actual disputes were left to the parties to bilaterally tackle them. It indicated that the implementation of the agreement would be a great challenge and purely based on the will of the signatory countries to take action. Further, the lack of concrete action plan to put this agreement into practice and follow-up mechanisms to monitor the progress created a convenient environment for the respective governments to avoid meeting this commitment. (Nechev, Mameledžija, & Nicić, 2016)

The commitment from the Vienna Summit was not just to tackle the bilateral disputes, but also to report annually on the progress reached and the steps that the countries have taken to resolve them. This reporting mechanism was expected to start a year after the Vienna Summit, following the summit in Paris. The participatory countries failed to take any actions or to compile follow up reports on the progress. Following the Vienna Declaration there was a limited number of reports tackling these issues and monitoring the progress, but these reports were mainly produced by civil society organizations that were part of the Civil Society Forum of the Western Balkans (Dimitrov, 2016).

The bilateral disputes soon disappeared altogether from the radar of the following summits. The issue was intentionally side-lined in the future meetings with the exception of limited discussions by the civil society and short briefing to the Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs⁸. Instead, following summits in Vienna and Paris the relations between Western Balkan countries deteriorated as did those with their neighbouring countries that are EU member states.

One of the key factors behind the failure to tackle bilateral disputes is the asymmetric power to put pressure on the disputed parties, especially when dealing with a dispute between an EU member state and a potential candidate. The bias in the process has undermined the credibility of the EU to successfully address these issues. Firstly, the failure to address one of the key bilateral issues involving a EU member state and a Western Balkan country as in the case of Greece and Macedonia, has diminished the effectiveness of the process. Moreover, this exposed the lack of mechanisms at EU's disposal to deal with disputes between member states and third countries. Secondly, EU's record of failing to solve disputes among its member states, such as Croatia and Slovenia⁹ (McClellan & Byrne, 2017) border contestation as well as potential demarcation disputes between Croatia and Western Balkan countries, points to EU's inability to prevent future disputes. Third, the tendency to "solve" only the attention-grabbing disputes appears hypocritical. The agenda of the Process made no mention of the dispute between Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina – two countries that have no relations at all with almost no freedom of movement and with a long standing economic embargo toward Kosovo, a situation that is arguably worse than that between Kosovo and Serbia.

On the other hand, the tendency to deflate the tension between Kosovo and Serbia by sweeping it under the carpet and instead addressing the "tensed" Serbian – Albanian relations, does not seem to have given any true effects aside from giving room to publicity and elevating the

8 Full report of the Civil Society Forum of the Western Balkans in Paris, July 2016 <https://euroalter.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Results-and-recommendations-FINAL.pdf>

9 Croatia refuses to accept an international tribunal ruling over a decades-old border dispute with Slovenia

Prime Ministers of Albania (Edi Rama) and Serbia (Alexander Vucic) to the positions of “show men” of the Western Balkans and raising their popularity stock in Brussels (Emini, 2016).

The process hardly dealt with the strained relations between Kosovo and Serbia, in spite of the fact that the relations between the two countries deteriorated in between the summits. Its organizers simply chose to relegate the responsibility to the EU External Actions Services (EEAS)-facilitated dialogue as a separate process. The ability to successfully address the row between Kosovo and Serbia - one of the rare cases when immense responsibility lies in the hands of the EU – would not only provide a good example of the EU’s effectiveness to transform conflicts, but would also elevate the EU to the status of a serious actor in the region. This calls for the EU to raise the bar and engage to successfully conclude the process. The strenuous peace, the political discourse from the Serbian government on ethnic partition of Kosovo between Serbia and Albania will increase possibilities for violence outbreak (RFE, 2017). Moreover, it will produce the “domino effect” for division along the ethnic lines of almost all borders in the Western Balkans region, with serious ramifications for Macedonia and Serbia itself.

INTERCONNECTIVITY AND YOUTH COOPERATION – MAIN ISSUES OF THE PROCESS

Following the Vienna Summit, the agenda moved forward to youth cooperation and economic development, as a way to seek outcomes in other directions and in hope that potential results in such areas will contribute to the overall stability in the region.

In the Paris Summit in 2016 the focus was placed on the **youth cooperation**. Moreover, the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) was considered as one of the biggest success of the Berlin Process. The rationale behind this initiative was simple: exchange of youth in the Western Balkans, especially between Tirana and Belgrade will enhance cooperation and bring stability in the region in the long run, akin to the Franco German Youth Office offered as a model of reconciliation to the aspiring countries (Hackaj & Peci, 2017, p. 9). The idea was widely supported by the EU and the Western Balkan countries to promote youth cooperation through implementation of programs that focus on democratic governance, education, promotion of reconciliation and cultural exchange. RYCO’s local ownership was innovative: its secretariat would be situated in Tirana (the only regional initiative with

the headquarters in Albania's capital) with local branches in all the capitals across the region (Podgorica, Sarajevo, Skopje, Prishtina, Belgrade), with a Secretary General from Serbia and Deputy Secretary General from Kosovo, and comprised of representatives from each Western Balkan country.

Despite the fanfare allotted to the event, there was little novelty in the idea. Youth cooperation already existed in the region; it took place in various exchange projects mainly supported by the EU¹⁰. In addition, there were fundamental problems in getting the RYCO off the ground and the process to do so lacked transparency as well as funding, a key challenge for the entire initiative. Local ownership in the RYCO meant that the signatory countries should provide the funds for the projects. Yet, despite the commitment of the governments in the region the process dragged on mainly due to reluctance of stakeholders to provide the necessary resources. The first round of call for project proposals was opened in mid-October 2017 (RYCO, 2017), almost two years after the agreement was signed.

Another major issue within the framework of the Berlin Process, which is closely linked to the youth prosperity and interconnectivity in the region, is economic development. **Together-ness and increasing connectivity** became the key words of the Process. While this aspect of the initiative was an integral part of the agenda, the comprehensive discussion on this issue took place only during the Trieste Summit in 2016, two years after the Berlin Process was launched. The choice of Trieste was not accidental; it was meant to symbolically remind the region and the EU member states of the historical legacy and geopolitical interdependence between the EU and the Western Balkans.

The interconnectivity aspect is by far one of the most expensive aspects of the Berlin Process. The aim is to build solid infrastructure and network between the WB countries that will potentially increase mobility of people, goods and ease the relations between countries through trade. This aspect mostly included the construction of roads, railroads, connectivity in energy sector and digitalisation – the key elements for a successful economic development and attraction of the foreign direct investments, which is on a downward trend in the entire region. Connectivity and togetherness became the buzzwords of the Process, aimed at creating jobs and a common regional economic area. Yet, instead of the common regional economic area the region, the economic embargo imposed by Bosnia and Herzegovina on Kosovo and the limited cooperation from Serbia toward Kosovo have frustrated the ambitious aspirations of

10 Security Research Forum – Exchange of Kosovar, Albanian, Serbian researchers in the field of security, Professional Work Exchange for Enhanced Policy Dialogue Program, the Enhanced Policy Dialogue of Professionals in Kosovo and Serbia Program (EPDP), and other similar programs and study visits.

the Berlin Process. Moreover, the powerline between Albania-Kosovo and Serbia, a Euro42 million investment by the German Government through the KfW Bank, is not yet operational because Serbia does not recognize Kosovo's system operator¹¹. The powerline is not only expected to improve the energy supply, but also improve the air quality in Kosovo (Albania, 2016).

The objective of increased connectivity and trade among Western Balkan countries expected to automatically stimulate economic growth and increase the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has not been achieved yet. The struggle remains in securing funds to support connectivity projects of this scale – project of high costs such as the railways, highways and energy transmission. Due to such systemic and practical setbacks, the Process failed to be perceived as a game changer in the region. At best, the Berlin Process is a boost to the overall reforms and to the economic development. One of the key obstacles to connectivity that EU hopes will impact stability – its end goal - was the lack of capacity to bring to life the 22 projects designed in the framework of this process, and the failure to secure the 3.7 billion EUR that are needed to fully implement these projects. There is no clear fundraising plan – with 86 per cent gap in funding, the EU External Actions Services committed to providing some funds, another part to be taken in form of loans (Williams, 2017), or other investments in the region, the projects are still on hold, or some of them are being implemented with investments from countries outside of the EU, namely China.

Another important element is the timeframe, more specifically the timespan between announcing these projects and their actual launch. Each project will take at least two years to get off the ground, leaving the citizens of the region jaded by the prospect of not reaping any benefits in their lifetime.

Seeking immediate results and under pressure to deliver to the citizens, some of the Western Balkan countries have turned to non-EU member states to implement these projects through the but so-called “easy investment and money”. Other investors in the Western Balkans ranging from Russia to Turkey, Gulf countries, and most recently China are eager to get their hands-on connectivity and infrastructure if the EU fails to deliver shortly. The most recent and largest investment in the region in the past four years was received from China as part of the so-called 16+1 format. As part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has invested in roads and railways in the Western Balkans with a total amount of EUR5.5 billion, invested mainly in Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Perhaps the most important

11 This blockade has caused concern among the EU and was raised as an issue by the Albanian Prime Minister with the German Chancellor, Merkel.

and expensive project to date is China's investment in the railway from Belgrade to Budapest as well as its investment on road infrastructure in Montenegro with EUR1 billion loan, a sum that makes one quarter of the overall state budget (Tonchev, 2017). Moreover, because these investments between regional governments and Chinese companies have been signed directly, without a public procurement procedure, they are in direct breach of EU procedures and run contrary to reforms advocated by the EU. As such they are likely to increase the potential for corruption in an already volatile region. Alarming, if these countries become part of the EU by 2025, following Juncker's declaration, the EU might inherit significant debt in both Serbia and Montenegro to Russia and China, an issue of concern especially after the Greek crisis.

So far, the only positive achievements have been in the realm of support for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) that have had an impact on private enterprises in the Western Balkans, but that have accomplished very limited results in reaching the overarching goal of networking and connecting the region (Commission, 2017).

Another faded hope is the attempt to link economic growth with reforms and democratization. Despite the modest economic growth of recent years, the rule of law and legal standards did not automatically and miraculously improve in the Western Balkan countries. As the EU Commission Country Reports and recently the Balkan Barometer have highlighted, the region in general has experienced democratic deterioration, state capture with competitive authoritarianism in the Balkans, and increased corruption (RCC, 2017, p. 25). Moreover, the reports imply that the political elites in these countries are under the illusion of the EU perspective, a perspective that exists in the political discourse, but it is not followed at all in reality.

BERLIN PROCESS: WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

Whether it is a game changer or not, the Process has managed to fill the gap that is left by the EU institutions in the WB. If there is one aspect of the Process that is successful is the fact that it kept the region active through the high-level meetings on an annual basis. Yet, the Process is struggling to deliver on the ambitions it set in the beginning perhaps due to the intergovernmental and multilateral nature of the Process, the big goals in a short time span, or due to the lack of mechanisms that would ensure the consistency of the process. Lack of funds to bring projects into fruition, as well as the also lack of support for the Berlin Process including in the country that spearheaded the process, lack of wide support by Brussels has diminished the role of the EU as a key factor in the region. In 2016, some efforts were made to remedy the process through the creation of the so-called “Berlin Plus” as advocated by the German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, but it is still unclear what its role will be or what resources it will secure to ensure the continuation of the process.

Clearly, the Western Balkans represents a geopolitical challenge for the EU, and the failure to set the region straight will significantly diminish the EU’s aspiration to be a global actor. Regaining ground in the Western Balkans is of crucial importance, especially now that Russia, Turkey, Gulf countries and China are keen to stretch their shadow over the region economically, politically and culturally. As such, the EU should intensify and use the existing enlargement mechanisms to push reforms and keep the region interested in the EU while improving the relations between the Western Balkan countries. Keeping enlargement on the EU agenda is of crucial importance. The French President Emmanuel Macron in Trieste Summit conveyed this sentiment, yet across the board the reality has not matched the rhetoric. The number of EU member states that are fond of Western Balkans’ integration into the Union is dwindling and that trend includes Germany, which so far has been the biggest supporter of the integration process. France’s decision to come on board to support the Berlin Process is a major boost for the Western Balkans though this might further highlight the stability approach over the reform approach in the aspiring countries. Still, the French presence alongside Germany is essential especially in the light of the British referendum to leave the EU, and Italy’s inability to lead and further the relations between the EU and the Western Balkans.

The next summit is expected to take place in London in 2018. The summit will take place less than a year from the time when the UK is expected to leave the EU and it is likely to be overshadowed by the fears of a crumbling union. While many would argue that it is hypocritical to promote EU enlargement and values in a country that has decided to leave the Union, keeping UK active and involved in support of the progress in Western Balkans could help the

EU itself redefine the relationship with its former member state for the continent's greater good. In turn, the UK would renew its commitment to the Western Balkans and continue to be the vocal and at times the key advocate for the European path of aspiring regional countries. The London Summit is expected to focus on security, opening up a new chapter in the Berlin Process. In addition, the summit should serve as a venue to take toll of the Berlin Process and its added value to the Western Balkans and European Union.

For the Process to yield results, it is important for the EU to provide support, but also to keep the enlargement high in the agenda as an undisputed goal. Providing the funds and launch initiatives of this level is not enough; more determination should be demonstrated in crafting a structured agenda for the region – with clear goals and timelines, much differently from the scattered presence and overlapping projects of the present.

Effective monitoring mechanisms should be put in place to boost the efforts in the region and ensure tangible outcomes. Developing these mechanisms will ensure better implementation of the commitments and it will help the EU grasp results and keep records of reforms. But most importantly it would hold the political elites of the Western Balkans accountable. The EU should stop providing support for the “strong men” of the Balkans in the name of stability. Instead it should warn and sanction the governments that fail to deliver, and fulfil their commitments to reforms and democratization.

Lastly, the EU should speak with a unified voice on regional disputes and on enlargement as the differentiated integration process has clearly challenged the entire process. A bottom-up approach with wide spectrum of actors, including civil society, and businesses would significantly boost the success of the process, while taking the integration monopoly out of the hands of the political elites in the aspiring countries.

Following the 2018 Summit in London, the Process is expected to receive an increase of interest of other EU countries to be on board. For instance, Poland has expressed high interest to host the next summit. This should be considered as a positive step as it will include one of the top economic powerhouses of the EU - and an example of the power of the EU to transform countries - in the Berlin Process. However, the political uncertainty within the EU and in the countries of the Western Balkans may shift the focus from the region once again akin to the Vienna Summit when the migration crisis gripped Europe. Hence, in the coming months it will be crucial for the countries of the region and their EU partners to show resilience and political will to continue with the enlargement process before the momentum is lost again.

It is hard to imagine the lifeline of the Berlin Process beyond 2018. Yet, there are many indications that the process will continue. A new momentum will be created with the launch of the new strategy on Western Balkans in February. It is important for the Process to include new participating states, to develop strategies, topics and specific agenda to support the democratic reforms in the Western Balkans. The synergy of all EU driven efforts in the region would further grow and transform the EU's enlargement approach. This way, instead of being a sidekick to the EU enlargement policy, the Berlin Process will take center stage in what should be their main trajectory on the Western Balkans' path toward the EU.

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