

# *Differentiated integration and the WB*

*Ass. Prof. Dr Erind Merkuri*

*Faculty of Law, University of Tirana*

## **BERLIN PROCESS**

### *Background*

The integration of the countries of the Western Balkans has been a constant aspiration of these countries which after the fall of communism have seen the countries of the European Union as well as this organization itself as a model to be followed. But despite this, due to its own internal problems, as well as criticism over the memberships of Romania and Bulgaria, the integration process stalled after Croatia's integration in 2013. This was followed by the Juncker Declaration. Recently EU faces a range of political and economic pressures, including slow growth and persistently high unemployment rate in many EU countries, as well as the rise of far-right populist parties, which tend to cherish anti-EU or “Eurosceptic” sentiments. These factors complicate the EU’s ability to deal with a multitude of unprecedented internal and external challenges. Among the most prominent are: the Greek debt crisis; Brexit, and a heightened terrorism threat (Archick, 2016).

The process was also affected by Brexit which clearly showed that enlargement towards the countries of the Western Balkans could lead to stagnation or it would slow down the whole process. More specifically, there are six countries that claim to be part of the European Union, Albania, Serbia, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and ultimately Kosovo.

This EU approach also shows that there is room for other world or regional powers such as Russia, China, or even Turkey to increase their influence in the region through investments and other strategies. Russia is intensively penetrating the region; spreading its sphere of interest thus creating a constellation of circumstances in which it can effectively project its power and interests while subjected to the EU sanctions.

This region composed of these countries shows some problems, the primary ones are the clashes and strong contradictions between these countries, which even become occasional obstacles for each other. So we can mention the process of demarcation between the WB countries which could

generate border disputes. We can also mention as key obstacles present in the EU integration path, starting from Serbia's blockade towards Kosovo's aspiration to join regional and international organizations (Bailey, 2016), and later on, Croatia stalling EU negotiations for Serbia mainly the blockade in opening chapter 23 and 24 (Milekic & Dragojlo, 2016). At this point, we can also mention the refugee crisis that causes tension between Croatia and Serbia, which took reciprocal measures to block the respective borders.

The persistent approach that the EU has taken into solving bilateral disputes shows that: First, there is a great interest to integrate a stable and prosperous region into the EU. Second, it shows the determination to gain credibility - among member states – to its commitment in promoting stability in the region. Third, the lessons learned from previous cases such as the Cyprus dispute, a frozen conflict rather difficult to tackle by the EU without the “member-ship” conditionality that would serve as a catalyst for a settlement.

### *Initiative*

Based on the above, Germany undertook an initiative for a process of development and integration of the countries of the Western Balkans. This is also the reason why it is known as the Berlin Process.

The initiative was launched on 28 August 2014 and is limited to a four-year period. This term had two meanings. The first concerns the 100th anniversary of the beginning and end of the First World War, a conflict which in fact had as its immediate cause the event in the Western Balkans. So the first meaning was symbolic of avoiding new conflicts. The second meaning mostly coincides with the timeframe which the President of the European Commission, Jean Claude Juncker, mentioned the same year when he said there would be no further EU enlargement during his five-year mandate.

This process includes twelve states: six Western Balkan states which are at different stages in their EU integration process (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia) and six EU members' states (Austria, Croatia France, Germany, Italy, and Slovenia). The process is supported also by the European Commission and other international financial institutions

### *Scope*

The scope of the process is to fill the enlargement fatigue, created as a result of some EU official statements no further enlargement over the next years, and remain relevant in the region, and to

serve as a temporary mechanism to keep the enlargement wheel moving. Gathering all six WB states and main EU countries supporting the enlargement towards the region,<sup>[1]</sup> the process aims to send the message that even without further enlargement of the EU, accession prospects will continue to drive long-overdue reforms and democratization in the region (Lilyanova, 2016).

The process aims to boost regional cooperation, including investments and road networks, youth cooperation, migration, sustainable development, etc. The Berlin Process was conceived as an instrument for stimulating reforms that the countries of the region should implement in the context of joining the Union, through initiatives and projects in areas of importance to the region as a whole.

The idea was that projects within the Berlin Process would enhance three dimensions of connectivity in the Western Balkans: the economic, social, and political. Each host country at the annual summit streamlined the Process by adding its “mark” and expanding the list of “tasks” for the countries of the region to achieve the overall goals set in Berlin. Thus, within the framework of the Berlin Process, at the annual summits and at the interim events, the topics of regional integration in the areas of transport, energy, economy, digitization, environmental protection, youth cooperation, scientific cooperation, etc. were initiated; as well as the topics of the rule of law, regional security, bilateral issues, and reconciliation - albeit significantly less frequently and generally outside of the central meeting.

### ***Process – Summits***

The Berlin Process work through the summits which are held every year and aims to bring together the leaders of each WB country and discuss different topics of mutual interest in order to accelerate the integration processes of the WB countries. Apart from the Berlin Summit of 2014 which was the first that launch the process, other five summits are held until 2019.

### **Vienna summit 2015**

The second Summit of the Berlin Process was organized in Vienna on 27 August 2015 and it resulted in an agreement on specific regional transport and energy priority projects. In addition to hard “infrastructure”, the connectivity package also included “soft measures”, i.e. specific reforms of the transport and energy policies relevant to the successful functioning of regional interconnections in these areas.

Also, special attention was given to solving bilateral disputes or committing the WB countries to resolve their bilateral disputes (Marusic, 2016). More specifically in the Declaration on the

Regional Cooperation and Solution of Bilateral Disputes of this conference, where participants agree to have a framework for the next four years during which they will strive to resolve bilateral issues and work towards reconciliation. Specific attention is given to border disputes, mainly the demarcation of borders between the WB countries (Vienna Summit Declaration, 2015). While most of the disputes involve two WB countries, since the Croatian membership into the EU, these disputes went beyond the WB borders, involving other EU members. Despite the commitment to resolve the bilateral disputes, the signing of Annex 3 – contained the agreement to neither block nor encourage other parties to block the progress of neighboring countries on the path towards EU integration.

The Vienna summit of 2015 involved civil society on a much larger scale – the Civil Society Forum was a massive side event with a rather vague agenda, but providing a stage for the dramatic rapprochement between the Serbian and Albanian leaders. It also led to the signing of a document on bilateral disputes in the region prepared by civil society representatives.

The Vienna summit also gave great specific weight to connectivity, the investment climate, education, and science.

The Final Declaration included a statement on the discrepancy between the “good progress in establishing a web of regional cooperation structures over the last years” and slow progress in solving “outstanding bilateral disputes”, and inviting Western Balkan leaders to take concrete steps towards lasting reconciliation in the region. Participation of CSOs on the margins of the main events was a novelty, compared with all the previously listed EU integration and regional cooperation tracks of action.

### **Paris Summit 2016**

The third Summit was organized in Paris on 4 July 2016. Whereas the two previous Summits led to progress in areas such as youth cooperation and connectivity in the fields of transport and energy, the Paris Summit introduced some new topics and reemphasized the importance of economic cooperation (mostly through the Business Forum, held on margins of the summit). This was done through agreements about transport, infrastructure, and the energy sector.

Its participants stated that the future of the Western Balkans lied in European integration and intraregional cooperation. Regional cooperation was highlighted as a key element for economic growth within the Western Balkans as it leads to increased connectivity between people, and the multiplication of cross-border and multi-country initiatives, as well as of joint ventures, and then to the fields of digitization and cooperation in science. The Paris Summit included also environmental issues and climate change mitigation

A notable exception of the process was establishing the Regional Youth Cooperation Office. This agreement represents a very concrete step in improving and, crucially, institutionalizing, regional cooperation of young people. This should ensure sustainability and continuity, as well as the inclusion of a larger number of youth participation in regional exchange programmers. A particular emphasis was devoted to youth unemployment, youth entrepreneurship, education, and research. Migration and the fight against terrorism and radicalization also appeared as a new and well-elaborated chapter.

At the Paris summit, held during the Brexit process, it was confirmed and repeated the message that “the future of Western Balkans lies in the European integration”.

It should be noted that the Paris Summit, unfortunately, had only minor effects in the area of resolving bilateral disputes in the region, although readiness for solving these disputes was affirmed: the Final Declaration by the Chair of the Paris Western Balkans Summit “recalled the importance of regional cooperation for the settlement of outstanding bilateral issues, as a follow-up to the Vienna summit”, but it failed to add any new input regarding this issue (Final Declaration by the Chair of the Paris Western Balkans Summit, 2016).

### **Trieste summit 2017**

The fourth annual summit within the Berlin Process initiative was the Trieste summit held on 12 July 2017.

Issues discussed during the summit included laying the foundations for a common Balkan market, increasing regional cooperation, improving and expanding infrastructure and energy services, curbing migration, and fighting corruption, terrorism, and radicalism. In this summit were defined the principles of the so-called "*The Balkan Marshall Plan*".

Another important approach and innovation in this summit was the support for the functioning of the 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 (RECOM).

As a rule, the establishment of this structure must receive a political and state imprint. Traditionally, in order to proceed, the successors of the former SFR Yugoslavia should sign an Intergovernmental Agreement on the Establishment of RECOM. To this end, related to the Berlin Process Summit in Trieste in July 2017, 50,000 citizens of Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Pristina,

Belgrade and Zagreb, supported with their signatures the proposal of the Coalition for RECOM that the Berlin Process, as politically the most important forum for regional cooperation, should be the platform within which this intergovernmental commission will be established. During the gathering in Trieste, reconciliation, and initiatives for the establishment of an intergovernmental commission as its key mechanism, enter the agenda of the Berlin Process Summit “through the back door”, i.e. within the Civil Society Forum.

### **London Summit 2018**

According to a press release from the government of the United Kingdom, the summit focused on three areas.

- increasing economic stability with a view to improving the business environment, encouraging entrepreneurship, addressing youth unemployment, and promoting regional inter-connectivity
- strengthening regional security co-operation to help tackle common threats, including corruption, serious and organised crime, trafficking of people, drugs and firearms, terrorism, and violent extremism
- facilitating political co-operation – to help the region resolve bilateral disputes and overcome legacy issues stemming from the conflicts of the 1990s and strengthen democracy

Normally the London summit was supposed to be the last and conclude the Berlin Process, but it was decided that this process would continue until the full integration of the countries of the region, continuing with the so-called Berlin Plus.

### **Poznan Summit 2019**

The sixth annual summit within the Berlin Process initiative was the Poznan Summit held on 4-5 July 2019. It was attended by Heads of government, foreign ministers, and the ministers of the economy from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, as well as two existing EU member states from the region - Croatia and Slovenia. In addition, other EU member states including Austria, France, Germany, and Italy, as well as representatives of the European Union and the International Financial Institutions, attended to the summit.

The discussion in this summit was on the economy, connectivity, civil society with a focus on youth and culture, and security.

## **Sofia Summit 2020**

Sofia Summit took place on 10 of November 2020, in the framework of the Berlin Process, bringing together the leaders of the Western Balkan countries and supporters of the initiative, representatives of EU institutions, representatives of the Regional Cooperation Council, CEFTA, OECD, European Bank of Investment, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, World Bank and the Regional Center for Youth Cooperation (RYCO). EU and Western Balkan leaders emphasized the importance of further strengthen regional cooperation as a way to advance on their European path.

The initiatives endorsed in Sofia build on commitments previously taken by the region at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb in May 2020. They will be supported by the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans adopted by the European Commission on 6 October 2020. This plan aims to mobilize up to €9 billion of EU grants to speed up the region's socio-economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and to accelerate its economic convergence with the EU.

In addition, it foresees a new Western Balkans Guarantee Facility, which can raise investments of up to € 20 billion. The leaders at the summit also welcomed the new 2020 connectivity package with six projects in the areas of sustainable transport and clean energy presented by the Commission under the Western Balkans Investment Framework. This package constitutes the first step towards the implementation of the flagship projects of the Economic and Investment Plan, while at the same time completes the delivery of the EU's 2015 pledge to deliver €1 billion in support of connectivity in the region.

At the end of the summit, the Declaration of Cooperation for the Regional Common Market and the Declaration for the Green Agenda for Western Balkans were signed. The creation of the Regional Common Market will serve as a preparatory step for the integration of the region in the EU Single Market and will help in economic recovery and support socio-economic convergences with the EU. Whereas, the Green Agenda Declaration will help to transform the regional economy into a green economy based on alternative and environmentally friendly sources. This declaration will add another dimension to regional cooperation in addressing global challenges.

## ***Successes***

The integration process raised hopes in the countries of the Western Balkans, especially after the declarations for the suspension of this process and it has boosted the interest of WB countries and EU stakeholders for regional cooperation.

Despite its shortcomings, the Berlin Process has “invigorated” regional cooperation in a way that none of the more than seventy initiatives linking state and non-state actors of social development in the region have previously managed to do. It has succeeded in bringing the political leaders of the region to the same table each year, but also in mobilizing regional initiatives and in setting up the most comprehensive platform so far for regional cooperation between civil society, young people, business entities, and other non-state stakeholders.

Some greatest successes of this initiative are the regionally coordinated and agreed Connectivity Agenda, supported by the EU and IFIs, and the establishment of RYCO. RYCO is considered a success of the Berlin process. Its establishment has brought Western Balkan leaders together to work for a better, peaceful future for the younger generations of the region. The launch and activities of the Western Balkan Chambers Investment Forum can be added to this list of the Berlin Process achievements as well.

Albania and Serbia can be considered the greatest beneficiaries of the Berlin Process for the time being. Albania became the seat of two important regional organizations – RYCO and the Western Balkan Fund. Due to its central geographic position, Serbia is a major beneficiary of the Connectivity Agenda and plays the leading role in the business dimension of the process because, together with the Chamber of Commerce of Kosovo, it is interlinking the regional chambers of commerce in the structure promoting investments, tourism, etc. But, above all, the two countries together made the greatest breakthrough in advancing their bilateral relations under the umbrella of the Berlin Process.

The Berlin process connectivity agenda has been latently successful in supporting concrete cross-border and regional infrastructure projects, which bring the highest value in the Trans-European Transport and Energy Networks (TEN-T and TEN-E).

The Berlin Process is the only high-level political venue that exclusively focuses on the six remaining non-EU Western Balkan (WB) countries. Amidst the multiple crises within the EU that distracted the Union from enlargement over the past few years, coupled with an increasing member states driven approach to enlargement, the Berlin Initiative, promoted since 2014 by the German government, is a much-needed boost in preparing the WB countries for future EU membership by trying to tackle some of the core structural problems in the region.



## *Challenges*

Despite the successes of the integration process of the Western Balkan countries, the challenges still remain and the Berlin Process has shown some weaknesses.

One of them is the lack of implementation or monitoring mechanism that will ensure implementation of the commitments made during this process can pose a serious challenge for the entire process. Potential decrease of attention, namely by Germany, would mark the Berlin Process of “just another initiative” without tangible results;

Preparation of annual summits has not always been transparent, and the selection of annual topics seemed rather an ad hoc exercise than part of the carefully tailored strategy. As a consequence of vaguely defined goals of the process, WB governments were at liberty to manipulate perceptions of achieved results in communication with other stakeholders and the general public.

In regards to efficiency, the capacity of national administrations to digest and implement the commitments made during the annual Summits is rather limited. This, coupled with the practice of constant shifts of topics on the agenda, means that over time, efficiency will become even more difficult to achieve. The Berlin Process is risking a significant overlapping with activities associated with the EU integration process.

Until the Summit in Trieste, there were only a few intermediate high-level meetings of Western Balkan leaders between the annual summits devoted to the topics of the Berlin Process. Even when the meetings are organized, often they are not focused and results-oriented and have limited follow-up activities, adversely affecting the efficiency of the summits, especially in terms of adopting joint positions on projects and discussing points of interest of Western Balkan countries. This is important in regards to maximizing the presence of EU and member state politicians and officials in the Summits. Based on experiences gathered during and between summits organized thus far, the limitation and prioritization of topics/policy areas and increasing the frequency of high-level meetings with Western Balkan leaders would increase the overall efficiency of the Berlin Process.

No progress whatsoever has taken place with reconciliation, as a consequence of which space remains for the revival of tensions that jeopardize cooperation in the region and its Europeanization. Therefore, the Coalition for RECOM proposes that this intergovernmental commission be established at the upcoming summit in 2018.

There has been no significant advance with regards to political disputes, border disputes, minority rights issues, property restitution, succession issues, or implementation of transitional justice mechanisms, i.e. issues that originate from the violent dissolution of the former Yugoslavia.

Despite committing to resolving bilateral disputes and the agreement not to block each other, the situation, in reality, does not appear to be as positive. The fact that Serbia block Kosovo's participation in regional initiatives directly and indirectly by using Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) (Szpala, 2016), Greece not participating in the Berlin process despite having an open dispute with Macedonia, and the fear of other potential candidates to hamper the EU integration process for the WB countries (Necev, et al., 2016), is an indicator that countries use asymmetric powers leading to disruption of the EU integration process for the WB.

Evidently, the current bilateral disputes have quite a strong potential to destabilize the relations between the WB countries and hamper regional cooperation, but it will seriously disrupt the EU integration process for the WB countries (Dimitrov, et al., 2015: 6-7). As such, tackling the bilateral disputes before they turn into an obstacle in the EU integration process. Henceforth, it is of crucial importance to prevent stagnation in the EU integration process, while decreasing the potential for the EU skepticism to increase among the WB countries (Töglhofer, 2013: 9-10).

The process should remain stable in terms of the number of actors involved, as an increase in size bears the risk of spoiling the dynamics and hijacking the agenda for self-driven interest. In terms of content, however, the process has been fluid as thus far it included issues of regional cooperation, bilateral issues, and other issues related to youth, migration, connectivity, ecology, and most recently rule of law. In the future, it is important to limit and prioritize the number of issues addressed within the Berlin Process to avoid the dilution of concrete tasks. Also, it is crucial to avoid duplexing of the accession process, as this makes the European Commission reluctant to substantially engage.

Experts from the region and the European Union rightly warn that the attention is mainly focused on the development of infrastructure and economy (for which there are also challenges when it comes to financing) does not automatically lead to the improvement of security, the rule of law, the solution of bilateral issues and reconciliation, which represent the fundamental problems of the region, and that it was naive to expect that it would. They object to the lack of measures to implement the Summit agreements and the absence of mechanisms for monitoring progress. A chance is also being missed to inspire the public through better communication to support the reforms necessary for the Europeanization of the region. Moreover, today it seems that "Berlin Plus" will only be a continuation of the previous practice and that this platform will not be used for the "repolarization" of the region's integration into the Union, which would motivate the

leaders of the Western Balkans to “compete” in the advancement of the rule of law, in security, in resolving bilateral issues and in the process of reconciliation.

Therefore, in the coming period, for the Berlin Process to bring about changes in fundamental areas, it must emphasize the political dimension of regional connectivity, in order to boost progress in the rule of law, in security, in resolving bilateral issues, and in advancing reconciliation - which are essential conditions for regional rapprochement and for bringing the region closer to Europe.

[\[1\]](#) Austria, Croatia, France, Slovenia, and Germany