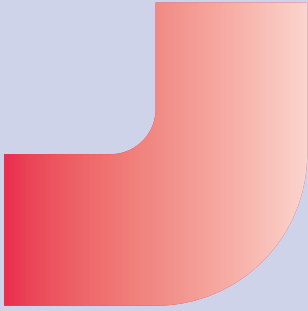


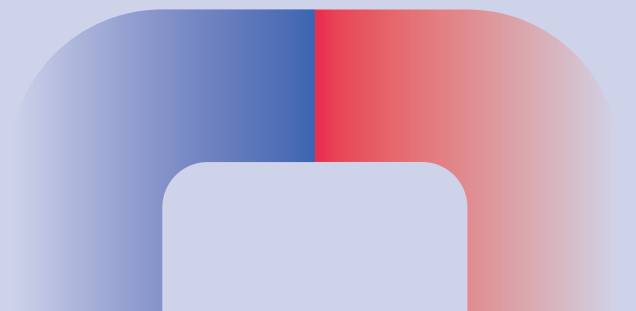
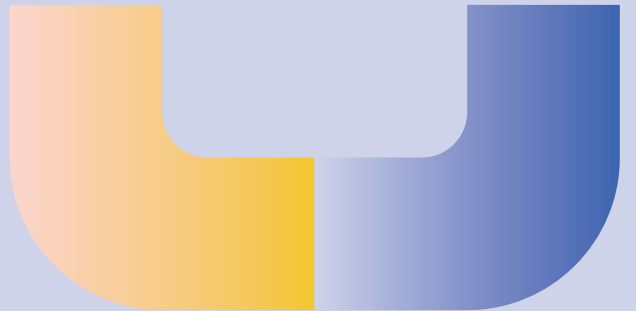


**Berlin
Process
Summit**
2024
10th Anniversary



Berlin Process Civil Society & Think Tank Forum 2024

Policy Recommendations



About this publication:

This collection of policy recommendations was elaborated as part of the project “Civil Society and Think Tank Forum 2024” in the framework of the Berlin Process, implemented by the Southeast Europe Association and the Aspen Institute Germany with generous support by the German Federal Foreign Office.

Civil society organization and think tanks from all Western Balkan countries and from the EU met in July 2024 in Skopje at the Preparatory Forum of the Civil Society Forum to elaborate policy recommendations within seven thematic working groups. The working groups were led by seven different organizations from the Western Balkan countries. The working group leads acted as rapporteurs on behalf of civil society and drafted the present collection of policy recommendations based on the results of the working group discussions. The facts and opinions expressed in this publication do not reflect the views of the Southeast Europe Association, the Aspen Institute Germany, or the German Federal Foreign Office.

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Berlin Process Civil Society & Think Tank Forum 2024

Policy Recommendations

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Working Group A: EU Integration and the Berlin Process

Enhancing EU Integration: The Berlin Process as a Key Driver of Regional Cohesion and Progress

Rapporteurs: Zoran Nechev, Anamarija Velinovska | Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” – Skopje (IDSCS)

Introduction

For more than two decades, the Western Balkan Six (WB6) countries have been engaged in the EU enlargement process but have faced significant challenges, including insufficient sustainable internal reforms, persistent bilateral disputes, and a lack of genuine political will both within the EU and the Western Balkan region. To address these obstacles, the Berlin Process (BP) was launched in 2014 to strengthen regional cooperation as a fundamental precondition for EU integration, aiming to revitalize and accelerate the accession process.

During this time, the BP has become an essential platform for regional cooperation, complementing EU integration efforts for the WB6. The BP addresses common regional challenges, fosters economic development, and promotes stability and security. Nevertheless, the BP must evolve and advance to remain relevant and effective a decade after its establishment. By closely aligning with the broader EU enlargement agenda and the plethora of new instruments deriving from EU enlargement policy, the BP can effectively assist the WB6 in navigating the complex challenges they face on this path.

Recommendations: Low-Hanging Fruit

WB6 governments should:

- Uphold and expand local ownership of the BP by actively placing topics of importance for the region on the BP agenda;
- Actively promote the benefits and successes of the BP to their domestic audiences and increase visibility of regional activities;
- Leverage the influence of youth to engage political elites on bilateral issues. Organize targeted events, public campaigns, and initiatives that actively involve young people in discussions and decision-making processes related to the BP throughout the year, not just around the summit.

The EU and member states should:

- Use the BP platform for exchange and capacity building to facilitate and support discussions among WB6 countries about policy developments in which the WB6 could substantially and sustainably integrate in the work of EU institutions, agencies, and programs before accession;

- Develop a communication strategy that involves local organizations and CSOs to promote the benefits of the BP and to raise awareness of the tangible opportunities it has brought to the region.

Regional and intergovernmental organizations, such as the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), and WB6 Chamber Investment Forum should:

- Develop monitoring frameworks for all Action Plans, supported by regional organizations. The monitoring processes should be evaluated through measurable indicators developed jointly by involved stakeholders. The results should be used to identify best practices, address challenges, and guide future policy adjustments. These frameworks should involve local CSOs to gather input from national governments and ensure accurate reporting. Monitoring should occur regularly, and the results should be made public to increase transparency and apply pressure for better implementation;

- Address bilateral issues among WB6 countries and WB6-EU countries institutionally, i.e., develop specific bilateral and/or trilateral youth exchange programs through the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO). Such programs should also include neighboring EU member states.

CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans should:

- Identify and implement targeted programs and projects, funded by various donors that support regional development, that align with BP commitments, and support WB6 government efforts in areas such as public awareness, advocacy, and capacity building;
- Focus on projects that complement WB6 government responsibilities such as monitoring compliance, fostering community engagement, and promoting regional cooperation.

Background: **Low-Hanging Fruit**

Immediate actions are necessary to enhance the BP's effectiveness and thereby support WB6 countries' EU integration. First, upholding and expanding local ownership is critical. WB6 governments should be proactive in placing regionally relevant topics on the BP agenda. This proactivity ensures that the agenda reflects local priorities and fosters a sense of ownership, making the process more relevant and impactful.

The development of a monitoring framework is essential for assessing progress, identifying challenges, and promoting champions of reforms. The implementation of the Action Plans should be transparently presented to every relevant stakeholder, including regional parliaments and CSOs. This transparency strengthens the process's credibility that actual implementation is ongoing and continuous for its final beneficiaries.

On a short-term note, increasing visibility of the BP's past and future benefits is also relevant. The responsibility to increase the public profile of BP activities should not fall solely on the respective host. Local CSOs that are familiar with the communities and constituencies they operate in/with can play a crucial role. Increasing visibility of BP activities can be achieved through effective communication strategies that highlight the benefits and successes of the pro-

cess, thereby garnering greater support and engagement from both local stakeholders and the public.

Finally, facilitating dialogue among WB6 countries and EU member states on potential areas of phasing-in and accelerated integration in policy areas with EU institutions is vital. This dialogue will help accelerate the EU accession process and leverage existing EU resources and expertise for regional cooperation and development.

Recommendations: **Tougher Nuts to Crack**

WB6 governments should:

- Financially support CSOs for participating in, monitoring, and actively promoting the BP. This funding should facilitate CSOs' engagement and ensure that CSOs can effectively contribute to the implementation of BP commitments;
- Facilitate the collection of input from EU institutions, including agencies, on where the WB6 can be phased-in or participate in EU programs.

The EU and member states should:

- Continuously engage and nurture expert exchange and capacity-building activities with WB6 administrations and CSOs, thereby increasing the number of dedicated positions in EU institutions, internships, and fellowship programs for Western Balkan applicants.

Regional and intergovernmental organizations should:

- Grant access to relevant documents and information in the earliest possible stage of policy preparations and initiatives within the BP framework. Doing so will enhance the transparency and improve the quality of these documents through external expertise from CSOs, parliaments, and other relevant stakeholders.

CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans should:

- Encourage respective institutions within the WB6 to consistently generate and utilize data, especially related to youth, minorities, and marginalized groups. This data should be the basis of policies and initiatives under the BP, ensuring they are relevant and effective for marginalized groups.

Background: Tougher Nuts to Crack

A long-term vision of the BP is necessary to set the pathway for progress for the years to come. The second set of recommendations addresses the need for tackling critical aspects of the BP and its alignment with EU integration efforts on a lasting plan. By implementing these measures, stakeholders can build a more predictable, inclusive, and effective process, ultimately supporting the successful integration of the WB6 into the EU. A foreseeable agenda can have an enduring effect on challenges that require a longer timeframe to resolve. Here, a focus should be placed on bilateral issues, capacity building and research, and financial support necessary for implementation and progress.

As a first step, the predictability of the process can be ensured through an inclusive, long-term vision for the BP with clear timelines and specific follow-up strategies. This approach is crucial for building trust among stakeholders, enhancing coordination, and maintaining momentum. This approach also fosters accountability, allowing for effective monitoring and evaluation of progress, which in turn maximizes the process's impact. By providing a clear direction, it encourages broader participation from regional governments and CSOs, ensuring that the BP continues to evolve and deliver tangible benefits to the Western Balkan region.

Simultaneously, the growth of the process should be accompanied by capacity building in the background. Cooperation with EU institutions for youth exchange programs and involvement through traineeships and fellowships which invest in human capital would eventually lead the WB6 countries toward EU membership.

Stocktaking and Future of the Berlin Process

Assessment:

Over the past decade, the BP has proven crucial for regional cooperation, effectively complementing the EU integration process by addressing tangible issues that impact citizens' daily lives. While the BP has garnered a positive outlook from regional governments, it must now advance to achieve more significant results by fostering the necessary political will at the highest levels to drive meaningful progress.

Recommendations:

Establish predictability of the process and define a long-term agenda

- Similar to the first phase of the BP, WB6 national governments and EU member states involved in the BP should outline a structured agenda that spans multiple years, fostering stability and continuity. This agenda should include ensuring expected host rotations and recognized priorities of the process.

Deliver on Common Regional Market (CRM) goals to unlock Growth Plan potential opportunities

- National governments should target reforms that would unlock financial incentives, thereby fostering institutional participation. Substantial opportunities for integration into the EU's Single Market will be provided to WB6 countries dedicated to regional economic cooperation through the CRM.
- The alignment of the Growth Plan with the CRM is expected to enhance commitment to regional cooperation among the involved institutions, promoting sustained progress and integration. However, the EU Commission should further explain the strong connection between the Growth Plan and CRM, as the specific criteria for assessing WB6 countries' regional economic integration remain unclear.

Enhance administrative capacities and alignment in the WB6 with EU policies related to the BP

- WB6 countries should gradually enhance administrative capacities and acclimatize them to EU policy frameworks through structured capacity-building initiatives under the BP. WB6 national governments should closely collaborate with EU member states to provide technical assistance, training programs, and exchange opportunities that prepare WB6 countries for future EU accession, fostering alignment with EU standards and practices in a sustainable manner.

Use the BP summits as a venue to discuss the introduction of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in the decision-making process in the intermediate stages of the EU negotiation process

- Within the EU, lack of consensus on enlargement-related issues has negatively influenced the integration path for candidate and potential

candidate countries. These circumstances highlight the need for improved flexibility in decision-making in the enlargement process. As some of the participating countries in the BP have more skeptical views on QMV, the BP should be used as a venue to overcome these differences and discuss potential solutions of introducing QMV in the enlargement process.

Allocate budgets within different stakeholders including governmental and non-governmental stakeholders for joint projects with neighboring EU member states

- Involved BP stakeholders should dedicate budgets to support joint EU-WB6 projects to promote cross-border regional cooperation, address shared challenges, and foster closer integration between WB6 countries and neighboring EU members. This initiative would leverage cross-border collaboration to achieve tangible benefits and promote stability and prosperity across the region.

Reintroduce rule of law mechanisms into the BP agenda

- Given the critical importance of the rule of law in the WB6, the BP should explicitly reintroduce and prioritize discussions on a rule of law mechanism. This aim can be achieved by establishing a dedicated working group within the BP framework to address rule of law challenges, ensuring that these issues receive the necessary focus. By integrating the rule of law into the BP, the initiative can better support the region's EU integration goals, mitigate the risks posed by democratic decline, and contribute to long-term regional stability and prosperity.

Conclusions from the Preparatory Forum in July 2024

The Preparatory Forum has provided a valuable platform to discuss key issues affecting the WB6, particularly in the context of EU integration and the BP. While this working group focused on broader perspectives, it is important to note that although discussions on rule of law mechanisms are currently not part of the BP agenda, they are incorporated into the current recommendations. The rule of law remains one of the biggest issues in the WB6. As the reforms associated with the BP are under direct influence and threat by the increasing EU emphasis on bilateral issues, opening new venues, such as the BP, for their discussion is important.

Another significant aspect discussed was the handling of bilateral issues, which often impede regional progress. The forum highlighted the potential of using various avenues, such as youth engagement, fostering local cross-border cooperation, and investing in cross-border and regional infrastructure projects, to address these challenges. These approaches offer promising ways to facilitate smoother regional interactions.

Finally, the working group reviewed the BP's operational mechanisms. While many initiatives are underway, their success depends on their ability to complement each other and to contribute effectively to the WB6's EU integration goals. Therefore, it is crucial to reassess and enhance the current methods of implementation, including planning, monitoring, and funding. Reflecting on past successes and identifying areas for improvement will be key to shaping the future of the BP over the next decade.

In conclusion, while the BP has achieved significant successes, ongoing efforts must focus on refining its approach to rule of law issues, addressing bilateral disputes, and ensuring cohesive and effective implementation strategies. By doing so, the BP can continue to support the WB6's path to EU membership and contribute to increasing regional stability and prosperity.

Working Group B: Dealing with the Past and Reconciliation

Advancing Prospects for a Well-Connected, Just, and Peaceful Western Balkan Region

Rapporteurs: Sofija Todorović, Zorana Milovanović, Ivana Nikolić | Youth Initiative for Human Rights

Introduction

The Western Balkan six (WB6) countries face significant challenges in addressing past atrocities and promoting reconciliation, particularly within the context of the EU's integration requirements. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas war have brought new challenges that affect the public's perception of dealing with mass atrocities in the Western Balkan region.

Denial and relativization of crimes have become normalized, undermining societal efforts to confront and learn from the past. This dynamic is compounded by pervasive revisionist rhetoric that infiltrates mainstream discourse, exacerbating social and political divisions. A fragmented and exclusionary culture of remembrance perpetuates divisive narratives, hindering efforts to establish a unified historical understanding which is crucial for reconciliation.

Legal frameworks often lack consistency and effectiveness across WB6 countries, hampering comprehensive transitional justice processes. Political entities frequently manipulate selective historical narratives to maintain power, perpetuating cycles of violence and impunity instead of promoting accountability and justice.

Persistent sociocultural and socioeconomic scars from past conflicts contribute to institutionalized segregation, limited educational opportunities, and a profound lack of trust between communities. Moreover, grassroots reconciliation initiatives receive inadequate support, media contribute to divisive ideologies, and politicization undermines efforts toward transitional justice by neglecting comprehensive data on victims' needs and experiences.

Addressing these multifaceted challenges is not only vital for achieving sustainable peace and unity in the Western Balkan region but also essential for meeting the EU's accession criteria, which emphasize adherence to European values of truth, justice, and inclusive social cohesion as fundamental prerequisites for future integration.

Recommendations:

Low-Hanging Fruit

WB6 governments should:

- Build memorials and establish permanent exhibitions, as part of their main national museums and memorial centers, on the suffering of the Roma during World War II and the wars of the 1990s, developed by Roma experts;
- Establish small bilateral or multi-lateral youth reconciliation programs (e.g., Serbia-Croatia);
- Ensure that Roma and other marginalized groups are included as policy makers and that their experiences are integrated into initiatives addressing the past and reconciliation. Experts from these marginalized groups should play a more prominent role in shaping these initiatives;
- Increase the presence and participation of non-national groups that suffered during the 1990s wars in each of the WB6 (such as: Croats and Bosnians in Serbia, or Serbs in Croatia);

- Encourage the media to adhere to ethical codes and strong editorial policies to counter misinformation about the past, avoid spreading disinformation, hatred, antigypsyism, and mistrust and advocate for local media regulatory mechanisms to introduce fines for breaches of ethical codes;
- Strengthen cooperation on war crimes trials to prevent impunity and address issues such as trials in absentia and the transfer of war crimes cases to countries whose nationals are alleged perpetrators;
- Take small steps to build a culture of recognition of crimes committed in the past to enable a wider societal trauma-healing process. Governments should publicly address the atrocities from the past and apologize to those who were perceived as the “other side,” emphasizing the importance of non-monoethnic remembrance in fostering reconciliation on a national and regional level.

WB governments and BP partner governments should:

- Ensure that the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) is actively promoting reconciliation and cooperation in the region and that its visibility is increased among the youth in the Western Balkans.

EU member states and the European Commission should:

- Secure political support to advance dealing with the past (DwP) and reconciliation in the WB6 by developing a comprehensive annual strategy. This strategy should include regular meetings among regional civil society organizations (CSOs) and governments to ensure sustained focus and progress on reconciliation efforts. In the case of Albania, this strategy should focus on dealing with the communist past and focus on memorialization and rehabilitation efforts related to political prisoners, survivors of persecution, and marginalized groups;
- Establish clear benchmarks and indicators for measuring the implementation of commitments in this issue area, to track the progress in dealing with the past processes;
- Maintain consistency in reports regarding critiques and recommendations on how WB6 governments handle dealing with the past and rec-

onciliation. React adequately and consistently whenever any of the WB6 governments glorify war crimes or war criminals, when they attempt to apply historical revisionism, engage in actions contrary to good neighborly relations, or promote exclusionary narratives;

- Increase funding opportunities for research on the 1990s wars, with a special focus on crimes committed against the Roma population;
- Increase support for media literacy and the health of digital space efforts in the region. Enable funds to push for the broader regional strategy of digital resilience to combat foreign malign influences that exploit hostilities, hate speech, denial of the fact about the conflicts and revisionist narratives online.

The EU together with CSOs and think tanks form the WB should:

- Invest in a new generation of Roma researchers and Roma-led research on the 1990s wars and the Roma genocide during World War II, to tackle the transhistorical aspects and manifestations of antigypsyism;
- Broaden financial support for dealing with the past and reconciliation to local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and media, and organize workshops on how to successfully report on these topics;
- Integrate DwP and reconciliation into mainstream EU-funded projects, including energy, digital, and environmental initiatives;
- Promote the learning of regional languages and present this initiative as one way to build strong connections among younger generations.

Background: **Low-Hanging Fruit**

While the BP has largely neglected DwP and related issues, a lack of political will for reconciliation in the region prevails, with tensions among WB6 countries and the spread of inflammatory rhetoric and misinformation growing. To create a well-connected and peaceful region, DwP needs to be prioritized on the BP agenda.

Media plays a crucial role in this prioritization, making it essential to influence media outlets within the BP framework by pressuring national governments to enforce ethical standards and impose fines for breaches. Media outlets must become part of the solution, not the problem.

Furthermore, clear benchmarks to measure the level of commitments taken in this field must be established. Such benchmarks could include the following items/criteria:

- the presence of discriminatory language in media;
- inflammatory public performances of high-level state officials;
- celebrations of convicted war criminals by state representatives and institutions;
- cutting state funding for media which promote hate speech toward people in the region (based on verdicts);
- number of bilateral or multilateral state-driven initiatives that promote the spirit of reconciliation;
- number of schools participating in regional exchange programs through RYCO or with other civil society organizations;
- cooperation memos signed between Ministries of Education/ Culture and CSOs which promote peace and reconciliation;
- creation of new initiatives such as RYCO, that will enable continued work with state involvement on reconciliation;
- meeting between state institutions and CSOs who work on DwP.

Justice for minority groups has been long delayed: for instance, crimes committed against Roma during World War II and the 1990s have been neglected, and their victims have been almost officially forgotten. To right these past wrongs, more research is needed into these topics, along with funding and political will to secure adequate memorialization and compensation for Roma victims and their families. These processes must be integrated within the framework of the BP.

The above-mentioned recommendations should be relatively easy to implement, as they concern areas not deemed problematic or highly sensitive by local governments and the general public in their countries.

Recommendations: Tougher Nuts to Crack

WB6 governments should:

- Ensure that WB6 governments incorporate CSOs and their resources and experiences in developing national policies related to DwP and reconciliation;
- Guarantee that victim associations are actively involved in discussions and decision-making processes concerning transitional justice in each of the WB6 countries. This should be adjusted for the different local contexts (such as including associations representing former political prisoners and survivors of the communist regime in Albania);
- Revise their national education curricula to include comprehensive and balanced accounts of their inglorious and troubling pasts (in the case of Albania the focus should be on crimes committed during the Communist period);
- Strengthen an inclusive culture of remembrance by financially and politically supporting the institutionalization of the memory of the Roma population and other marginalized groups who suffered during World War II and the 1990s wars at the national level;
- Form a regional group of experts to develop these textbooks and offer them to educational institutions, ensuring that Roma experts are included to help mitigate manifestations of anti-gypsyism and incorporate Roma history;
- Include an unbiased and critical section on Albania's Communist past, allowing students across the WB to learn about Albania's unique historical experiences and its consequences.

EU institutions and BP partner governments should:

- Pressure WB6 governments to ratify agreements signed as part of the BP;

- Insist that local governments replace inflammatory narratives related to the 1990s wars by internal dialogue and bilateral discussions. Urge local governments to address the problematic role of their own religious institutions in promoting intolerance, hatred, and inaccurate representations of the events of the 1990s;
- Establish an Erasmus program for the WB6 to support young people, beginning with short-term exchange programs and diploma recognition, and working toward the inclusion of higher degree studies within the Erasmus framework. The program must incorporate affirmative measures for Roma and other young people from marginalized groups.

WB6 national governments and CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans should:

- Work to resolve the statelessness of Roma resulting from the 1990s wars and related political turmoil, including Roma-led CSOs in this process.

Background:

Tougher Nuts to Crack

The recommendations listed above address urgent issues that require time, political will, and compromise for implementation. Their success largely hinges on local governments' readiness to integrate DwP and reconciliation into their agendas. The challenge is that WB6 governments have been hesitant to adequately address past issues and endorse reconciliation, despite these being crucial for fostering a sustainable future with good neighborly relations. Local CSOs play a key role in these recommendations, given their extensive expertise in developing national policies related to DwP and reconciliation. Victim groups, often overlooked in law and policy development, are also critical. One participant highlighted a "misuse of victims from all sides by national institutions," while another noted the "closed" nature of dialogue with CSOs, emphasizing that reconciliation requires an open dialogue process involving both national and regional discussions. Recommendations focusing on education, such as establishing a regional Erasmus program and developing joint history textbooks, present significant challenges. For instance, Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo and the reluctance of WB6

governments to acknowledge past actions by their forces and leaders complicate the creation of joint history textbooks. The EU and its institutions will need to play a stronger role, applying influence and pressure to overcome these obstacles.

Additionally, addressing inflammatory narratives about the 1990s wars will take time. Within the BP framework, states should be held accountable for promoting such narratives and for not punishing those who do (which means treating hate speech and antigypsyism as a criminal offense).

Stocktaking and Future of the Berlin Process

Assessment:

The BP has largely overlooked DwP and reconciliation, topics which are essential for a peaceful and well-integrated region. Numerous unresolved issues hinder good neighborly relations, including the glorification of war criminals, inflammatory rhetoric, and the unwillingness of regional governments to confront the past. During the Preparatory Meeting in Skopje, participants argued that the BP did not produce substantial results in these areas. One participant noted that the Berlin Process "closed the book on the past," implying a need to address these issues from the beginning. Another participant highlighted that "the Berlin Process lacks a strategy and program for DwP and reconciliation," adding that transitional justice "disappeared" after 2019. The working group proposes the following recommendations aimed at addressing these critical issues.

Recommendations:

- Make DwP and reconciliation a permanent agenda item at BP Summit meetings;
- Endorse the principles of dealing with the past through the Berlin Process and insist on their implementation. The ten DwP principles were drafted in 2021 and focus on the rights and broader treatment of victims and survivors of armed conflicts, among other things;¹

¹ Civic Society Consortium Promoting "Dealing with the Past" Principles in Kosovo, <https://www.forumzfd.de/en/civic-society-consortium-promoting-dealing-past-principles-kosovo> (accessed August 1, 2024).

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- WB6 governments should be required to prepare annual reports on their progress regarding the implementation of the annual strategy together with local CSOs and present them at annual meetings;
 - Monitor the benchmarks to measure the implementation of commitments outlined above in the framework of the BP;
 - Ensure all relevant stakeholders, including from Croatia, are actively taking part in the BP in order to build a more connected, just, and peaceful region;
 - Use the BP as a platform to advocate for the development of joint history textbooks that promote an unbiased, inclusive, and accurate representation of historical events in schools across the region;
 - Dedicate specific meetings within the BP to WB6 governments' progress in DwP and reconciliation. Governments should present their annual reports on the matter, prepared in collaboration with national CSOs (including Roma-led national/regional CSOs) that have the most expertise and experience in this field;
 - Maintain the themes of the past and reconciliation as central topics within the BP until further positive developments are acknowledged in the Western Balkans;
 - Revisit and expand the Declaration of Western Balkans Partners on Roma Integration within the EU Enlargement Process to cover DwP and reconciliation. Prime ministers should reaffirm their commitment to the Declaration, while Roma-led national and regional CSOs should be included in preparing recommendations for the renewed commitment;
 - Include Roma in transitional justice-related laws and regulations, acknowledge Roma suffering, provide Roma with rights to reparations, and criminalize antigypsyism;
 - Place greater emphasis on fostering and influencing bilateral relations within the frameworks of the BP and accession to the EU. This is especially important with regards to the ongoing disputes between Kosovo and Serbia. The Berlin Process could serve as another platform where the ongoing conflict between the two could be addressed.

Conclusions from the Preparatory Forum in July 2024

The group members were proactive and highly knowledgeable about the topic. As the invited representative from Albania was not able to physically join the Preparatory Forum, they gave feedback and input on the report at a later stage. This input was incorporated into the final version of the report.

Geopolitical circumstances, particularly foreign malign influences, were frequently mentioned as new challenges in the Western Balkans. The digital sphere has become a major platform for spreading fake news, hateful narratives, and antigypsyism, with organizations lacking the capacity to counter these online threats. Some organizations highlighted the role of AI and algorithms, noting that these technologies often promote dominant narratives about the past, which is difficult to address without staff who are both technologically literate and interested in the subject.

There is a noticeable decline in international pressure to prioritize DwP as a crucial aspect of building functional and liberal democracies in the region. CSOs often lack strong public support from international representatives due to concerns about damaging relations with regional governments. The issues of missing persons and the lack of institutional dialogue with key reconciliation organizations have been repeatedly stressed, as has the statelessness of Roma resulting from the 1990s wars, particularly in Montenegro. In some countries, such as Serbia, experts in this field are not only ignored but actively targeted by institutional representatives. The misuse of war crime trials as political tools has been observed, with states using trials, detentions, and indictments for political purposes. The ongoing tensions between Serbia and Kosovo have a spillover effect on the region, while recent changes in Montenegro raise new concerns about the country's stance on reconciliation. The challenges in this area have intensified over the past decade, with some countries, like Kosovo and Serbia, making it dangerous to publicly address the victims of other nationalities. The shrinking space for civil society working on DwP is a persistent trend.

The rapporteur concludes that the BP must be utilized to bring together institutional representatives and civil society to support the dialogue that is currently lacking, providing a much-needed forum for exchange.

Working Group C: Gender and Diversity

Berlin Process: Pathways to Gender Progress

Rapporteurs: Tania Ivanova, Irina Jolevska | Reactor – Research in Action

Introduction

Gender equality is an integral part of EU accession, including the chapter on fundamental rights, and determines the overall pace and efficacy of the negotiations. EU accession is the main driver of pro-democratic reforms and advancements on fundamental values across the Western Balkan Six (WB6) countries. However, research findings show inconsistent results and uneven progress when it comes to gender equality achievements across the WB6.¹ Additionally, the WB6 face worrying democratic challenges in the form of anti-gender movements and anti-rights narratives, which have contributed to regressive policies and delayed adoption of gender equality legislation, with similar patterns evident spread across the region.²

To counter such challenges, the EU and WB6 governments should monitor these movements, develop strategies to mitigate their impact, and mainstream gender equality in the EU accession process, including in the framework of the Berlin Process (BP).

The BP is an important platform to help equalize efforts among the WB6 and support a more unified regional effort in countering and preventing gender backsliding. Such an effort is crucial for establishing strong gender equality mechanisms that contribute to inclusive policies and ensure participatory democracies across the WB6.

Recommendations: Low-Hanging Fruit

WB6 governments should:

- Openly and firmly support and adhere to human rights standards set forth by international and regional treaties, as well as domestic legislation, whilst ensuring the state's secularity. Actively monitor and report on the implementation of these standards;
- Strengthen the enabling environment, safety, and security for civil society organizations (CSOs) and human rights defenders (HRDs) by tackling and processing cases of misinformation, hate

speech, and attacks against activists, ensuring protection to CSOs/HRDs against smear campaigns;

- Mainstream gender in the Declaration on Roma Integration.

The EU and member states should:

- Utilize existing monitoring mechanisms (e.g., progress reports and Stabilization and Association Agreement committee meetings) and financing more effectively to generally hold WB6 governments accountable. When financing reforms through the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) III, demand that WB6 governments meaningfully

1 Jana Juzová, Towards Inclusive EU Accession: Follow-Up Assessment of the Western Balkans' EU Accession Process from a Gender Perspective, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, March 2024, <https://womensnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Final-2022-Regional-Monitoring-Report-1.pdf> (accessed July 5, 2024); Giulia Pasquinelli, Scratching the Surface: Assessing Implementation of Gender Equality Standards in the EU Accession Process for the Western Balkans, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2023, <https://reactor.org.mk/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2023/11/Regional-monitoring-report-EU-accession-final.pdf> (accessed July 5, 2024).

2 Aleksandra Janowska and Maria Puchalska, Western Balkans and Their Uneasy Road to (Gender) Democracy, Heinrich Boell Stiftung, February 2024, <https://pl.boell.org/en/2024/02/26/western-balkans-and-their-uneasy-road-gender-democracy> (accessed July 5, 2024); Ermira Danaj, Andrea Čolak, Nevena Dičić Kostić, Sofija Vrbaški, Women's Rights in Western Balkans, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, November 2023, <https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/The-Kvinna-till-Kvinna-Foundation-Womens-Rights-in-Western-Balkans-2023.pdf> (accessed July 5, 2024).

include specific objectives toward gender equality and conduct due diligence in assessing progress;

- Demand that WB6 governments allocate sufficient funding for implementing and monitoring gender equality commitments, strategies, and measures, in partnership with feminist civil society actors;
- Demand that WB6 governments ensure collection and use of gender-disaggregated data, and support data collection and research on diverse and marginalized groups (e.g., LGBTQIA+, persons with disabilities, Roma, and rural women).

The EU and WB6 governments should:

- Conduct gender analyses to inform policy-making at all levels, in line with Gender Action Plan (GAP) III commitments;
- Provide information regarding EU integration and the BP in accessible and usable formats, including for persons with disabilities;
- Actively share examples of good practices in all aspects of social inclusion from other countries, including smaller constituencies;
- Develop, implement, and monitor gender-sensitive solutions to energy poverty and the rising cost of living, with concrete targets for reducing poverty.

Background:

Low-Hanging Fruit

These recommendations are achievable because they rely on established mechanisms and existing political commitments within international treaties and national legislation. Recent research indicates that WB6 governments often lack political will to implement EU gender equality recommendations, and that IPA III action documents frequently fail to meet the minimum gender marker criteria.³ To address these challenges early on, the EU should use established monitoring and financing mechanisms to ensure accountability – at proposal and approval stages. Integrating gender into the Declaration on Roma Integra-

tion would also provide a much-needed intersectional perspective. Providing information in accessible formats for persons with disabilities, such as adding captions and subtitles to videos, is another action that requires minimal effort.

Recommendations: Tougher Nuts to Crack

WB6 governments should:

- Connect efforts in retraining and facilitating mobility of qualifications across the WB6 to initiatives that mitigate gender job segregation and promote participation of diverse women in all sectors;
- Develop effective monitoring and reporting mechanisms for harassment and gender-based discrimination at work and ensure availability of prevalence data, including an intersectional approach;
- Improve overall institutional responses to gender-based violence (GBV) in line with the Istanbul Convention, emphasizing the critical link between GBV, women's labor market participation, economic independence, and political participation;
- Increase the sensitivity of law enforcement officers and judiciary toward women, LGBTQIA+, and other marginalized groups.

The EU should:

- Use feminist foreign policy to integrate principles of equality, intersectionality, peace, human security, nonviolence and demilitarization, accountability, and gender justice into all policies, programs, and initiatives toward the WB6.

The EU and WB6 governments should:

- Ensure that all initiatives targeting the Common Regional Market (CRM) are gender mainstreamed;
- Allocate funds and operationalize intersectionality as a method of institution-building, opening space for marginalized groups;

³ Jana Juzová, Towards Inclusive EU Accession: Follow-Up Assessment of the Western Balkans' EU Accession Process from a Gender Perspective, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, March 2024, <https://womensnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Final-2022-Regional-Monitoring-Report-1.pdf> (accessed July 5, 2024).

- Reposition security in terms of safety, redefine and reclaim the concept of Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) to reflect past achievements, and create space for inclusion of women, youth, and marginalized groups, addressing their current and future challenges;
- Develop robust infrastructure and implement legal frameworks to combat gender-based hate speech and digital violence, particularly in the unregulated digital space and with the increased use of AI. Support gender-sensitive digital tools and media, including comprehensive gender sensitivity training for developers, algorithm transparency, and digital media content that prevents gender stereotypes and creates inclusive narratives for diverse gender and age groups;
- Recognize, monitor, and mitigate potential gender and intersecting inequalities in the green transition.

Background:

Tougher Nuts to Crack

These are achievable yet resource intensive recommendations, requiring funds, political will, and time. All of the recommendations call for an intersectional understanding of gender and policies targeting disparities in several areas, such as the CRM, labor market, peace and security, political participation, welfare systems, GBV, the green transition, and digitalization, among others. The implementation of these recommendations must consider the specific challenges faced by women from diverse social and economic backgrounds and other marginalized groups. For the intersectional approach, it is also crucial to shift the narrative particularly from security threats to the everyday lack of safety that women and marginalized groups experience, and work toward creating institutional practices and legal frameworks that comprehensively address GBV. Feminist civil society actors should be included through formal consultation mechanisms to ensure meaningful contribution, while matching these efforts with funding modalities that ensure sustainability, safety, and proper response to alleviate shrinking space, recenter and support feminist CSO participation in policy processes.

Stocktaking and Future of the Berlin Process

Assessment:

To date, gender equality and intersectionality have received limited attention in the BP. Besides slight improvements, additional efforts are needed to further gender mainstreaming. The BP is well positioned to own and facilitate the integration of intersectional methods, due to its regional multilayered, multistakeholder policy-making space. It should approach gender equality as a horizontal issue and apply it cross-sectorally. Gender mainstreaming guidelines should be developed to ensure a systematic approach. Their implementation should align with other gender mainstreaming processes and documents, such as GAP III and the WPS agenda.

Recommendations:

- Develop a systematic approach to include intersectional gender perspectives through mainstreaming guidelines, in consultation with feminist civil society actors;
- Complement the guidelines with concrete measures continuously monitored within the BP, with regular reporting on their impact;
- Continue the practice of a dedicated gender and diversity working group at the Civil Society Forum, providing a safe platform for discussing and highlighting these issues, thus ensuring the policy and advocacy visibility they require. Recognize gender and intersectionality as cross-cutting topics, ensuring mainstreaming across all other working groups;
- Establish a dedicated plenary session within the BP framework for multistakeholder exchange on diversity and gender.

Conclusions from the Preparatory Forum in July 2024

Civil society is an integral part of EU integration and the BP. The role of feminist civil society actors is indispensable for ensuring the inclusion of diverse and critical gender perspectives in various policy areas. The recommendations in this report were developed through dynamic discussions within the “gender and diversity” working group, which included civil society representatives with a diverse range of backgrounds. Their insightful and informed contributions, including local and national WB6 perspectives, are vital for the discussed topics, as well as the conclusions and recommendations stemming from this working group.

Gender equality and intersectionality, understood in the broadest and most inclusive sense, should lie at the core of all policies and initiatives, including the BP. As such, they should be the essential component in all the recommendations listed in this report. Proposed “gender and diversity” recommendations outline some of the required political and practical steps needed for advancing gender equality through both the BP and the EU accession processes of the WB6. Some of these proposed steps can be implemented using already existing mechanisms, as well as through commitments and obligations stemming from adopted policies, strategies, and legislation. There are also more challenging recommendations that will demand significant effort and long-term persistence and dedication from all the relevant key actors at the EU, regional, national, and local level.

This report emphasizes the current developments and democratic challenges due to the rise and growing influence of anti-gender movements and their potential negative impact on peace and security, safety, stability, and participatory democracy in the Western Balkan region. These challenges disproportionately affect women and other marginalized groups, which highlights the need for renewed efforts to further progress toward gender equality and prevent backlash at all levels. Recent developments have demonstrated that progress made in terms of gender equality is fragile. These ambitious yet achievable recommendations require sustained commitment, engagement, and systematic collaboration of diverse stakeholders, including civil society and feminist civil society actors.

Working Group D: Common Regional Market and Mobility

Bridging Disparities and Fostering Cooperation: Challenges and Pathways to a Unified Regional Market in the Western Balkans

Rapporteurs: Alban Hashani, Visar Vokri | Riinvest Institute

Introduction

The Western Balkan Six (WB6) face multifaceted challenges in facilitating mobility and achieving a unified and functional regional market. The countries in the region exhibit varied levels of economic development, leading to disparities in economic performance and standards of living. Fragmented markets and differing economic policies further hinder the creation of a cohesive regional market. In addition, historical conflicts and ongoing political disputes contribute to instability and distrust among the countries, complicating efforts toward regional cooperation. Governance issues, such as corruption and weak institutional frameworks, impede effective policy implementation while migration trends across the region present challenges to workforce stability and social cohesion. Furthermore, there is often a mismatch between the skills of the workforce and the needs of the labor market, exacerbating employment issues.

Different regulatory frameworks and legal systems across the region also create barriers to trade and mobility, while complex administrative procedures in the form of technical barriers discourage cross-border economic activities. To address these challenges, the region needs to initiate comprehensive economic reforms and integration policies to reduce disparities and promote convergence. Encouraging political dialogue and conflict resolution mechanisms is crucial to address historical and ongoing disputes, while strengthening institutions, enhancing transparency, and combating corruption through comprehensive reforms will improve governance. Harmonizing regulatory frameworks and legal systems is essential to facilitate cross-border economic activities, and simplifying administrative procedures will reduce bureaucratic obstacles.

Additionally, fostering initiatives that cultivate a sense of regional identity and cooperation will further enhance the prospects for a cohesive regional market.

Recommendations: Low-Hanging Fruit

WB6 governments should:

- Establish a regional platform for collecting and sharing data on migration trends to inform policy decisions and improve coordination;
- Implement educational and vocational training programs targeting inactive female populations, as well as minorities such as the Roma and Ashkali, to enhance their employability and economic participation;
- Systematically involve civil society organizations (CSOs) in designing the reform agendas. The inclusion of CSOs in the process of designing as well as implementing reform agendas is a crucial step. However, the inclusion of CSOs in each country should be planned thoroughly and space should be provided for their meaningful participation in this process. This inclusion should go beyond mere consultation of the agendas at the end of the process, but rather, be an ongoing process from the start of the design until the last version of the document.

The European Commission should:

- Support and expand mobility agreements within the region that facilitate the recognition of diplomas and regulated professions across borders;
- Radically increase its direct support (i.e., access to finance) to the ultimate economic stakeholders of regional and EU integration. These are primarily export-oriented small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and their associations and ecosystems of support;
- Devise the new Growth Plan within the framework of the EU accession process, linking its conditionality and the implementation of reforms closely with the gradual accession to the EU. For example, the implementation of certain reforms could be tied to the closing and/or opening of relevant accession chapters. This approach would incentivize countries in the region to implement reforms in a timely manner and enhance the credibility of the Growth Plan.

CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans should:

- Advocate for systematic impact assessments of regional cooperation agreements to evaluate their effectiveness and make data-driven adjustments, while also ensuring that an enabling environment is created for CSOs to continue this work and enhance the quality of the assessments.

Background:**Low-Hanging Fruit**

To foster sustainable development and regional stability in the Western Balkans, the above recommendations are crucial and should be immediately implemented. These recommendations address mobility, data collection, education, economic support, and civil society involvement, targeting key areas that require enhancement for regional integration and growth.

First, establishing a regional platform for collecting and sharing data on migration trends is essential for informed policy-making and improved coordination. Accurate and comprehensive data will enable policy makers to understand migration patterns, identify challenges, and implement targeted interventions. WB6 governments, supported by international organizations, should take the lead in creating and main-

taining this platform. The impact of this initiative would be a more coordinated and responsive approach to migration management, contributing to regional stability and economic development.

Second, implementing educational and vocational training programs for inactive female populations, as well as minorities such as Roma and Ashkali, is critical for enhancing their employability and economic participation. These groups have historically faced significant barriers to employment, leading to social exclusion and economic disparities. WB6 governments, in partnership with the non-governmental organization (NGO) sector and international donors, should design and execute tailored programs that address the specific needs of these communities. By improving their skills and integrating them into the labor market, these programs will reduce poverty, promote social inclusion, and enhance overall economic productivity.

Third, the EU's support in expanding mobility agreements that facilitate the recognition of diplomas and regulated professions across borders is vital. This initiative will alleviate the significant barriers to workforce mobility within the Western Balkans, enabling professionals to seek employment opportunities beyond their national borders. Recognizing qualifications will not only enhance individual career prospects but also address skill shortages in various sectors across the region.

Fourth, the European Commission (EC) should significantly increase its direct support to export-oriented SMEs and their associations in the Western Balkans. These SMEs are the primary economic stakeholders in the region's integration with the EU, driving innovation, employment, and economic growth. Enhanced financial support, technical assistance, and market access facilitation will strengthen these enterprises, making them more competitive in the European market. This action requires a concerted effort from the EC, national governments, and business associations, leading to a more robust and dynamic regional economy.

Fifth, CSOs should advocate for systematic impact assessments of regional cooperation agreements to evaluate their effectiveness and make data-driven adjustments. These assessments will ensure that agreements are delivering the intended benefits and identify areas for improvement. CSOs, leveraging their expertise and grassroots connections, can provide valuable insights and hold governments accountable

for implementing effective policies. This approach will lead to more transparent, efficient, and impactful regional cooperation.

Lastly, including CSOs in designing the reform agendas of Western Balkan governments is crucial for ensuring that these agendas are comprehensive and inclusive. CSOs bring diverse perspectives and expertise, representing the interests of various societal groups. Their involvement will ensure that reforms are not only top-down but also reflect the needs and aspirations of the broader population. WB6 governments should establish formal mechanisms for CSO participation, fostering a more inclusive and democratic reform process that strengthens governance and social cohesion. Implementing such recommendations will significantly enhance regional cooperation, economic development, paving the way for a more integrated and prosperous future of the region.

Recommendations: Tougher Nuts to Crack

WB6 governments should:

- Intensify political dialogue among themselves to enhance their commitment to regional cooperation, a vital component of the EU integration process;
- Align existing regional cooperation mechanisms such as the Central Europe Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) with the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans by incorporating sustainability clauses to reflect current environmental priorities;
- Uphold the rule of law, good governance, democratic values, and fundamental rights as the core principles guiding Common Regional Market (CRM) efforts. Without these fundamentals, reforms are ineffective;
- Intensify efforts in addressing structural reforms, particularly in the judiciary, public procurement, and financial control, using them as a base needed to uphold the reforms implemented in priority CRM areas.

The EU and member states should:

- Urge Bosnia and Herzegovina to ratify the Agreement on Freedom of Movement with Identity Cards in the Western Balkans, signed on November 3, 2022, within the Berlin Process (BP). The full ratification of the Agreement on Freedom

of Movement with Identity Cards in the Western Balkans is a crucial step for the mobility of the region. The WB6 countries, together with the support of the EU, should push forward for its ratification. Incentives for ratification are most welcome from the EU, and the ratification of mobility agreements should be a conditionality in the EU accession process, especially within the EU Growth Plan;

- Prioritize regulatory alignment initiatives with clear timelines and milestones, focusing on the most critical non-tariff barriers first. Support regions lagging in regulatory alignment to promote cohesion.

Background: Tougher Nuts to Crack

These recommendations are crucial for the WB6 region, especially in the context of EU integration and regional stability. Addressing these recommendations requires immediate and concerted actions from both regional governments and the EU to foster cooperation, enhance governance, and promote sustainable development. These recommendations are particularly challenging due to their complexity and the significant structural changes and political actions they necessitate.

Strengthening political commitment to regional cooperation is imperative for the Western Balkans. Governments in the region must prioritize and actively participate in regional initiatives, showcasing a collective commitment to the EU. This action could involve regular high-level meetings, collaborative projects, and shared policy frameworks. Enhanced political commitment will foster trust, reduce regional tensions, and present a more cohesive and stable region to the EU, thereby accelerating the integration process. Ratifying the Agreement on Freedom of Movement with Identity Cards, signed within the BP, is vital especially for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. This agreement will facilitate easier cross-border movement, thereby fostering economic activity and social integration. By ratifying this agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina will not only enhance regional cooperation but also align itself with broader European norms, showcasing its readiness for deeper integration.

Incorporating sustainability clauses into existing cooperation arrangements like CEFTA is essential to address environmental priorities and increase regional

cooperation in implementing the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. This alignment will ensure that economic cooperation does not come at the expense of environmental degradation. This move will promote sustainable economic growth, enhance environmental protection, and align the region with the EU's Green Deal.

The rule of law, good governance, democratic values, and fundamental rights are the key principles and the foundation of effective reforms. Without a firm commitment to these fundamentals, any efforts toward regional cooperation and EU integration will be undermined. Governments must prioritize judicial independence, transparent governance, and the protection of human rights. This prioritization can be achieved through legislative reforms, capacity-building initiatives, and active civil society engagement. Upholding these values will enhance public trust, ensure fair processes, and create a stable environment conducive to sustainable development and integration. Furthermore, addressing structural reforms for the judiciary, public procurement, and financial control are critical for implementing reforms and ensuring accountability. Structural reforms in these sectors will provide a robust foundation for other initiatives, ensuring transparency and efficiency. Effective structural reforms will lead to a more transparent, accountable, and efficient governance system, crucial for regional stability and EU integration.

Finally, EU support is vital for prioritizing regulatory alignment in the Western Balkans. Clear timelines and milestones should be established, focusing initially on the most critical non-tariff barriers. The EU can provide technical assistance, funding, and capacity building to regions lagging in regulatory alignment, promoting cohesion and reducing disparities. This support will help the WB6 align with EU standards, facilitating smoother integration and enhancing the region's competitiveness. Implementing these recommendations requires a coordinated effort from both regional governments and the EU. The impact will be profound, leading to enhanced regional cooperation, sustainable development, stronger governance, and accelerated EU integration.

Stocktaking and Future of the Berlin Process

Assessment:

Over the past decade, the BP has played a pivotal role in fostering regional cooperation and economic integration in the Western Balkans. Initiated in 2014, the process aimed to support the European integration of the Western Balkans by encouraging collaboration among the region's countries. Key milestones include the implementation of various declarations, such as the 2017 Trieste Summit Declaration, which laid the groundwork for the Western Balkans CRM. Despite challenges, including political instability and varying degrees of commitment among the participating countries, the CRM agenda has maintained some degree of continuity, with annual summits and consistent engagement from the EU. The accountability of relevant actors has been a mixed bag, with some countries making significant strides while others lag behind. Major achievements include advancements in infrastructure projects, progress in digital integration and, to some extent, increased mobility. As the BP enters its next phase, it is crucial to build on these successes, address lingering issues of political will and implementation, and ensure a more inclusive and transparent approach to fully realize the potential of a more integrated regional market in the Western Balkans.

Recommendations:

WB6 governments should:

- Develop policies within the BP that prioritize inclusive economic growth, focusing on marginalized groups such as women, youth, and rural communities. Such policies could involve targeted training programs, financial incentives, and support for entrepreneurship;
- Strengthen civil society engagement in the BP. By involving CSOs in decision-making and implementation, the process can benefit from diverse perspectives, increase public support, and ensure that the initiatives address the needs and concerns of citizens.

The EU should:

- Establish a robust and transparent monitoring and accountability framework to ensure that commitments made by participating countries are met. Possible examples could include regular progress reports in the framework of the BP or a

publicly accessible online dashboard. Enhanced accountability will foster trust and encourage compliance, benefiting governments, civil society, and citizens by ensuring tangible progress;

- Invest in digital infrastructure and innovation across the Western Balkans, supporting initiatives like e-governance, digital literacy programs, and cross-border tech collaborations. By promoting digital integration, the BP can enhance

regional connectivity, improve public services, and create new economic opportunities for businesses and citizens;

- Prioritize, in coordination with WB6 governments, measures of the CRM Action Plan 2025-2028 critical for integration into the EU internal market. Create a prioritization for each building block of the CRM Action Plan.

Conclusions from the Preparatory Forum in July 2024

The Preparatory Forum discussions on the CRM and mobility highlighted that the Western Balkans face significant hurdles in achieving a cohesive regional market and facilitating mobility due to varied levels of economic development, fragmented markets, differing economic policies, historical conflicts, and ongoing political disputes. These factors contribute to instability and distrust, further complicating regional cooperation. Governance issues, such as corruption and weak institutional frameworks, impede effective policy implementation, while migration trends disrupt workforce stability and social cohesion. Additionally, a skills mismatch in the workforce exacerbates employment issues, and differing regulatory frameworks create barriers to trade and mobility.

The working group underscored the need for comprehensive economic reforms and integration policies to address these challenges. Political dialogue and conflict resolution mechanisms are crucial for overcoming historical and ongoing disputes. Strengthening institutions, enhancing transparency, and combating corruption through comprehensive reforms will improve governance. Harmonizing regulatory frameworks and legal systems is essential to facilitate cross-border economic activities, while simplifying administrative procedures will reduce bureaucratic obstacles. Moreover, fostering initiatives that cultivate a sense of regional identity and cooperation will further enhance prospects for a cohesive regional market.

To foster sustainable development and regional stability, participants recommended several immediate actions. The EU's support in expanding mobility agreements is vital for recognizing diplomas and regulated professions across borders, thereby reducing workforce mobility barriers. Establishing a regional platform for collecting and sharing data on migration trends is essential for informed policy-making and improved coordination. Implementing educational and vocational training programs for marginalized groups is critical for enhancing their employability and economic participation. Furthermore, there was a consensus that CSOs should advocate for systematic impact assessments of regional cooperation agreements to ensure their effectiveness and make data-driven adjustments. Including CSOs in designing the reform agendas of Western Balkans governments is crucial for ensuring comprehensive and inclusive reforms that reflect the needs of the broader population.

Furthermore, discussants and participants in the working group called for a strengthening of political commitment to regional cooperation. Governments must prioritize and actively participate in regional initiatives, showcasing a collective commitment to the EU. Lastly, during all discussion sessions it was stressed that upholding the principles of the rule of law, good governance, democratic values, and fundamental rights is crucial for effective reforms. Addressing structural reforms in the judiciary, public procurement, and financial control is critical for ensuring accountability and transparency. The EU's support in prioritizing regulatory alignment is also crucial for facilitating smoother integration and enhancing the region's competitiveness. In conclusion, the discussions at the forum underscored the importance of collective action and a shared vision for a more integrated and prosperous future for the Western Balkans.

Working Group E: Energy, Climate Change, and Decarbonization

Decarbonization in the WB6 is Fake and Chaotic

Rapporteurs: Nihad Harbaš, Dragan Minovski | ReSET – Sustainable Energy Transition Center

Introduction

The EU intends to become a global leader in the “fight against climate change” and adopted the European Green Deal and a vision of “Europe - the world’s first climate-neutral continent by 2050.”¹ Accomplishing this vision of European climate neutrality is not possible without implementing a green transition everywhere on the continent, including in the Western Balkan Six (WB6) countries, which are on the path toward becoming EU member states.

The consensus view of energy experts in the Western Balkan region, also reflected in the working group discussion at the Civil Society & Think Tank Preparatory Forum in July 2024 is that existing EU policies, support measures, and established mechanisms for the implementation of the energy and just transition will not attain their expected results and implementation in the Western Balkan region. This view is especially true for the realization of the 2030 and 2050 decarbonization targets adopted within the Energy Community Treaty (EnCT). Without significant adjustments to EU policies and support mechanisms for the Western Balkans, the trend of disordered decarbonization where WB6 countries merely provide lip service in their decarbonization policies will continue.

WB6 governments implement the EU Acquis in national legislation very slowly. They still rely predominantly on fossil fuels and plan projects based on fossil fuels. Implementation and adoption of laws are very slow, coupled with non-compliance with the laws that have been adopted and approved. Decarbonization of the WB6 is fake and chaotic.

One of the key subjects is carbon pricing and the inevitable application of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), but also the need to emphasize local energy transition (decentralized decarbonization) and the active engagement of local players (citizens’ energy, prosumers, etc.).

Recommendations:

Low-Hanging Fruit

WB6 governments should:

- Create, increase, and enable accessible supporting schemes for vulnerable citizens and households experiencing energy poverty such as home energy efficiency measures, prosumers, energy communities, etc.;
- Involve civil society organizations (CSOs) and think tanks in processes of adopting strategic documents, like National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs), through consultation, working groups, public hearing, etc.);
- Include youth and minority representatives in national committees addressing the energy transition through official working groups.

¹ European Commission, 2050 Long-term Strategy, https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/climate-strategies-targets/2050-long-term-strategy_en#:~:text=Striving%20to%20become%20the%20world's%20first%20climate%2Dneutral%20continent%20by%202050.&text=The%20EU%20aims%20to%20be,to%20the%20European%20Climate%20Law%20 (accessed September 2, 2024).

The EU should:

- Halt support for further investments in fossil fuels in the WB6 countries;
- Permit free allocation of CO2 certificates under certain conditions for WB6 countries under the EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS).

The EU and WB6 governments should:

- Respect and implement the same environmental and social standards in the WB6 countries as in the EU – “No double standards.” For example, the WB6 should cooperate with the EU to implement same standards in mining, energy and climate.

Regional and intergovernmental organizations, such as the Regional Cooperation Council and the EnCT contract parties should:

- Create an EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) accession road map for the WB6 countries;
- Support the implementation of international obligations from the EnCT within WB6 countries;
- Reform the EnCT to explicitly involve the WB6 countries’ national parliaments in the EnCT’s decision-making processes.

Background:**Low-Hanging Fruit**

WB6 countries are strongly committed to aligning their national legislation with the EU energy packages which create the foundation of the EU internal energy market. By transposing provisions of the EU acquis, WB6 countries will address the need to liberalize their electricity and gas markets, separate energy supply and generation from the operation of transmission and distribution networks (unbundling), create requirements for independent regulators, and empower energy consumers by providing them with greater choice, transparency, and protecting consumer rights in retail markets.

Currently, the implementation of the EU’s energy policy for the WB6 region is primarily carried out through the EnCT, a process that is largely implemented as a “top-down” approach. It is necessary to consider and reform the EnCT to explicitly involve WB6 countries’ national parliaments in the Energy Community’s decision-making processes, thus moving towards a “bottom-up,” democratic, inclusive, and fair decision-making approach.

WB6 energy policies should minimize double standards between the EU and WB6 countries, especially regarding mining, energy and climate. The WB6 should apply EU environmental and social standards. With these standards in place, it would be impossible to support future investments in fossil fuels which is a very significant step toward the energy transition in the WB6 countries.

Carbon pricing is one of the most important issues for the Western Balkans. This approach would provide initial funds for the decarbonization of the thermal power sector in the WB6 countries that are ready to phase out coal. Almost all WB6 countries possess certain schemes and mechanisms to support vulnerable categories of citizens and households. Nevertheless, these instruments are not enough and not available to everyone. Given the future challenges expected for the region, it is therefore necessary to create new mechanisms and support schemes, as well as increase the availability of support for all vulnerable categories of citizens and households. Integration of the WB6 into the EU ETS poses significant challenges. However, free allocation of CO2 certificates under certain conditions would allow WB6 countries to unlock critical funds and align with EU energy policy.

A huge challenge in the coming period for all WB6 countries will be the adoption and implementation of National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs). To ensure greater transparency and inclusivity throughout these processes, it is necessary to promote the full involvement of CSOs and think tanks, as well as to support capacity-building measures in WB6 countries. Doing so would improve transparency, implementation and monitoring processes of the WB6’s NECPs.

Recommendations:**Tougher Nuts to Crack****WB6 governments should:**

- Act on their international commitments to pursue an energy transition by implementing the EU Acquis to support more sustainable energy infrastructure projects such as energy production, storage, and transmission and distribution networks that are harmonized across national and regional boundaries;
- Adopt and implement national climate legislation aligned with the EU’s European Climate Law, including commitments to climate neutrality;

- Establish a benchmarking system to monitor the progress of local governments in implementing climate legislation and sustainable energy projects. Shine a spotlight on municipalities which are front-runners;
- Include climate change in primary and secondary school education for young people.

The EU should:

- Open the existing EU Just Transition Fund (JTF) to the WB6 countries to make capital investments in sustainable energy projects more feasible;
- Address breaches of international obligations in the rule of law section of annual progress reports towards EU accession;
- Establish a monitoring framework to support WB6 governments in meeting their energy transition goals.

CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans should:

- Create regular opportunities for cooperation between energy authorities, experts, and CSOs from different WB6 countries on the national and local/municipal levels.

Background:

Tougher Nuts to Crack

WB6 countries undertook a set of obligations by signing the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (2020) following the 2030 UN Agenda, the Paris Agreement (2015), the European Green Deal (2019), and the treaty establishing the Energy Community. For greater rapprochement between the WB6 and the EU, rapid development within the entire Western Balkan region is necessary. This process will not only run parallel to developments in EU countries, but in certain instances will have to use the experiences of EU countries to avoid certain obstacles during implementation.

Capital investments in the Western Balkan region are necessary, especially investments that support a just energy transition. To increase access to capital, the existing EU Just Transition Fund should be made accessible for WB6 countries. At the same time, the fund should be proportionally and appropriately increased. In this way, WB6 countries will be more in-

involved throughout the entire process, procedures and opportunities will be equalized, and greater coordination will be achieved between the EU and associated EU aspirants. When possible, investments should be directed towards coal regions to assist the region's most vulnerable citizens.

The construction of significant energy projects should be coordinated between WB6 countries and the EU with clear objectives and timeframes. Such projects should include expanding and improving transmission and distribution networks, joint projects at the regional level, increasing production and balancing capacities (systems for energy storage and balancing of the energy system), as well as other capacities that will accelerate the energy transition. Harmonized national and coordinated regional energy transition strategies are essential. To this end, greater and more frequent cooperation between energy authorities, experts, and CSOs across different WB6 countries is needed.

Implementing existing commitments will help mitigate climate change and improve environmental protection. WB6 countries should also adopt climate legislation aligned with EU Climate Law, including commitments to climate neutrality, which would create a legal basis for the establishment of Monitoring, Reporting, Verification, and Accounting (MRVA). MRVA will support the WB6 countries' energy and climate policies by helping track progress toward renewables, energy efficiency and emissions reduction targets.

In addition to national monitoring frameworks, monitoring progress at the local level through benchmarking metrics would create a realistic picture of the implementation of measures which contribute to decarbonization, energy and just transition. The implementation of measures at the local level such as energy efficiency measures (e.g., efficient windows, thermal insulation of envelopes) and renewable energy sources (e.g., heat pumps, pellet boilers, solar thermal, photovoltaic) in the private, public and residential sectors would contribute not only to the reduction of GHG. It would also support the energy transition toward more efficient energy consumption and the use of renewable energies, and at the same time contribute to a just transition through the creation of new green jobs at the local level. Those are the reasons why a monitoring and reporting process on the results obtained at the local level is important.

These metrics should include not only sustainable energy infrastructure projects or updated legal frame-

works, but also efforts to educate citizens. It is important to include climate change, decarbonization, as well as the energy and just transition in school curricula, as this will entrench awareness of these issues in society at large and create public support for action.

Progress on the local or national level should be multiplied through regular exchanges between energy regulators and authorities, which should be facilitated by CSOs. CSOs and think tanks should be involved in the decarbonization and the energy and just transition processes through regular meetings. For instance, they should be included in working groups within the EnCT, working groups and committees of projects implemented by international donors in WB6, working groups for the preparation of documents and legal policies as well as in conferences and seminars. This would ensure transparency of the process.

Stocktaking and Future of the Berlin Process Assessment:

Expertise and transparency is needed to ensure full inclusion of CSOs and the broader expert community in creating, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the energy transition policies in the Western Balkans. To ensure regional expertise in this process, it is necessary to involve the EU as a facilitator of such a network of CSOs and experts with compatible organizations and academic institutions in EU countries.

Establishing an open platform for communication and informing decision makers throughout the process is crucial for a fair and proper energy and just transition process. Over the years, we have witnessed that the lack of such an open platform slowed down the entire process throughout the region and did not allow the process to have the desired dynamics.

Additionally, dedicated capacity-building support in the WB6 countries to increase the adoption of new technologies and business models by facilitating the actual transfer of research and development and up-skilling and re-skilling of the workers, especially those in coal regions, is needed. One very important step forward would be to establish “Centers for Sustainable Energy Transition” in each WB6 country. These centers would serve as organizational hubs for coordinating activities aimed at improving professional capacities and increasing the adoption of new technologies and business models to promote a just clean energy transition, especially in vulnerable communities.

The lessons learned indicate the urgent need to create a Berlin Process monitoring summit for decision implementation supervision in all areas including energy, climate change, and decarbonization. The purpose of such a summit would be to create annual reports on the process’ progress, as well as the implementation of the recommendations from the previous period. This supervision will not only give a much clearer picture of all processes but will also encourage greater implementation of the recommendations.

Recommendations:

- Support existing networks of CSOs and think tanks in the WB6 countries which are active in the areas of energy, climate, and decarbonization by facilitating cooperation with compatible organizations in the EU;
- Support the establishment of a network of independent experts from industry, academia, and think tanks from the WB6 countries;
- Support the establishment of “Centers for Sustainable Energy Transition” in each WB6 country;
- Create a Berlin Process monitoring platform for decision implementation supervision. Create an annual report on progress for decision implementation.

Conclusions from the Preparatory Forum in July 2024

The Preparatory Forum discussions on energy, climate change, and decarbonization highlighted that the Western Balkans face significant hurdles in the energy and just transition process due to its traditional dependence on fossil fuels as well as distrustful and unresolved interstate relations in the areas of energy and assets. These factors contribute to instability in the region and further complicate regional cooperation.

Governance issues such as corruption and weak institutional frameworks impede effective policy implementation, while the transition to green energy disrupts workforce stability and social cohesion.

The working group underlined the need for much greater engagement and financial support from the EU. Moreover, it is vital that the same standards be implemented in the WB6 countries as in the EU. Greater engagement of all energy authorities from the WB6, both at the national and regional level, as well as the involvement of CSOs and think tanks from the region is needed.

Strengthening institutions, enhancing transparency, and fighting corruption through comprehensive reforms will improve governance. Harmonizing regulatory frameworks and legal systems is essential to facilitate cross-border energy activities such as connectivity and energy security, while the simplification of administrative procedures will reduce bureaucratic obstacles in speeding up the energy and just transition. National energy authorities must accelerate the transposition, adoption and implementation of international obligations from the EnCT and other international obligations. The European Commission should address breaches of international obligations in the rule of law chapter of its annual progress reports.

To foster the energy and just transition, participants recommended several immediate actions. The EU's support in the implementation of international obligations is vital for the energy and just transition. Allocation of CO₂ certificates under certain conditions is essential for the sustainable transition of WB6 economies. The current situation is alarming and prompt action is needed. Implementing educational training programs for the wider public, youth, and minority communities is critical for enhancing their involvement and employability in a just and inclusive transition.

Furthermore, there was a consensus that CSOs and think tanks should advocate for systematic impact assessments of the energy and just transition to ensure their inclusion, effectiveness and make data-driven adjustments. Including CSOs in designing the reform agendas of Western Balkans governments is crucial for ensuring comprehensive and inclusive reforms that reflect the needs of the broader population.

Furthermore, discussants and participants in the working group called for the establishment of a benchmarking system to monitor the progress of local governments in implementing climate legislation and sustainable energy projects but also respect and implement the same environmental and social standards in the WB6 countries as in the EU – “No double standards.” The EU's support in prioritizing a bottom-up approach is also crucial for facilitating smoother implementation of the energy and just transition projects.

In conclusion, the discussions at the forum underlined the importance of fostering the decarbonization, energy and just transition process by using the Just Transition Fund in order to support the most vulnerable groups regarding energy poverty, citizens' energy concepts and social inclusion especially in coal regions.

Working Group F: Environmental Protection and Sustainable Economic Development

Bringing the Environment to the Core of Development

Rapporteurs: Aleksandër Trajçe, Klejn Ngraçani | PPNEA

Introduction

The need for a synergy between environmental protection with economic development in the Western Balkan region is a necessity for all its citizens, whose health and wellbeing are already affected by pollution, energy poverty, and more. Such a synergy is also necessary to ensure a sustainable future for generations to come, which are entitled to “all individual and collective human rights, including but not limited to, civil and political rights, economic, social and cultural rights, the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment; the right to development; the right to self-determination; and the right to peace.”¹

Following the breakup of Yugoslavia and the fall of the communist regime in Albania, the Western Balkan region has experienced a shift in political, social, and economic paradigms, while also undergoing state formation, transitional justice, the introduction of the rule of law, and many other reformatory processes. In this context of a shift from controlled economies to free market ones, the fast pace of economic activities in the region has sidelined the need for preserving the natural environment, attributing the latter a marginal position in policy-making issues. Furthermore, the rise of competitive authoritarian or hybrid regimes throughout the Western Balkan Six (WB6) countries, which preserve a democratic façade and a general positive attitude toward EU integration while following semi-authoritarian practices, have paved the way for the prioritization of economic development over environmental protection.² This dynamic presents challenges for civil society, investigative journalists, as well as engaged citizens to play their role as watchdogs.

Recommendations:

Low-Hanging Fruit

WB6 governments should:

- Strengthen Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) procedures through legislation change, which should ensure the meaningful involvement of experts and civil society organizations (CSOs) in the process, adequate public consultation, effective monitoring of the implementation of the envisioned measures and their actual impact, including relevant adjustments; and to establish mechanisms for accountability of all responsible authorities;
- Implement a mechanism for revision of the approved EIA and SEA reports relevant for protected areas in the region, in close cooperation with independent experts and CSOs, thus preventing further nature degradation in a timely manner;
- Revise laws that intersect and have an impact on biodiversity, in order to mainstream the latter and strengthen its position in issues such as infrastructure development, spatial and urban planning, strategic investments, energy sector, etc.;

1 Ana María Suárez Franco and Sandra Liebenberg, “The Maastricht Principles on the Human Rights of Future Generations,” in: Global Policy Forum Europe, Spotlight on Global Multilateralism: Perspectives on the Future of International Cooperation in Times of Multiple Crises, April 5, 2023, 59–63, https://www.globalpolicy.org/sites/default/files/Spotlight_Multilateralism_web.pdf (accessed September 2, 2024).

2 Florian Bieber, “Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans,” in: Licia Cianetti, James Dawson, and Seán Hanley, eds., Rethinking “Democratic Backsliding” in Central and Eastern Europe, Routledge, 2019, 95–112.

- Empower youth participation and engagement in nature conservation causes by means of capacity building, education programs, mentorship, funding for youth-led green actions and start-ups, as well as cooperation with CSOs and EU institutions;
- Update respective databases, speed up and finalize the establishment of national Emerald Networks as a matter of urgency, thus aligning the key component of nature protection with EU standards and fulfilling one of their primary obligations as contract parties to the Bern Convention.

The European Commission should:

- Support the revision of approved EIA and SEA reports relevant for protected areas throughout the WB6 countries, by providing both technical and financial aid;
- Envision concrete action plans for the implementation of the desired goal of biodiversity mainstreaming under the 2030 Biodiversity Strategy, which will also be adopted in the future by the WB6 countries as prospective EU member states;³
- Prioritize permaculture and extensive farming in the region rather than intensive agricultural practices by changing the selection criteria in the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance Rural Development (IPARD) program and accordingly adapting its monitoring mechanisms after the funding is approved;
- Stimulate and prioritize the process of establishing the national Emerald Networks throughout the WB6 countries through EU-funded CSOs and governmental projects, aiming to prepare these countries for joining the Natura 2000 network.

Background: Low-Hanging Fruit

These nine recommendations represent the beginning of a roadmap toward a sustainable future for the WB6 countries. First, EIA and SEA procedures are the only

tools which are used to assess the future impact of proposed plans, strategies, and development projects on the natural environment. The strengthening of these tools and their proper implementation are crucial to prevent the further destruction of the WB6 countries' natural values, which already face significant negative impacts due to various developments. Throughout the region, these tools are currently being used to justify environmental destruction, which testifies to the urgent need for their revision.

The mainstreaming of biodiversity into other policies also requires political will from the WB6 governments, which is expected in the framework of the commitment to the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB). The mainstreaming of biodiversity also represents a strategic goal of the EU Commission, as envisioned in the 2030 Biodiversity Strategy.⁴ The Biodiversity Strategy should be complemented with concrete action plans, targeting the WB6 countries as prospective member states.

The establishment of national Emerald Networks is a structured, independently verified and monitored process for nature protection. Nevertheless, this process has been paused for over a decade in WB6 countries. While the first Emerald Network seminar was held in Montenegro in 2011, none of the WB6 countries have submitted an updated database with proposed Emerald sites. In 2017, the Secretariat of the Bern Convention attempted to revitalize the process and, although some countries showed interest, no concrete steps followed. Although several EU-funded projects in preparation for the Natura 2000 process in the Western Balkan region were implemented, they did not stimulate progress in building the Emerald Network.

Agriculture is also a crucial sector where environmental protection intersects with economic development. Practices such as intensive agriculture pose a dire threat to important ecosystems and biodiversity. To boost sustainable agriculture in the region, the EU Commission, primarily through the IPARD program, should prioritize applications that focus on extensive agriculture and the application of environmentally friendly and climate neutral practices, such as permaculture. The monitoring mechanisms that follow the change in the program's selection criteria should

³ European Commission, Directorate-General for Environment, EU biodiversity strategy for 2030 – Bringing nature back into our lives, Publications Office of the European Union, 2021, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2779/677548> (accessed August 15, 2024).

⁴ Ibid.

be adapted accordingly. Through shifting the region's agricultural practices within a sustainable paradigm, the need for development would coexist with the need to preserve the natural environment.

Finally, it is an urgent matter to empower youth in environmental protection and sustainable development issues, since they represent one of the generations that will soon deal with the consequences of today's policy-making. WB6 governments should prioritize empowering youth in green startups and other sustainable initiatives, which also need to be complemented with access to EU projects and funds.

Recommendations: Tougher Nuts to Crack

WB6 governments should:

- Envision a mechanism that ensures all environmental taxes and fines be disbursed to actions that improve environmental protection and nature conservation, complementing the budget of the respective relevant institutions across the region;
- Promote the inclusion of green infrastructure in spatial planning, to ensure the connectivity of ecosystems within the respective countries and throughout the region. Through this approach, crucial ecosystems that connect wildlife within and among the WB6 countries will be connected, serving the purpose of biodiversity conservation;
- Align public investments to support marginalized Roma and other vulnerable and ethnic minorities in transitioning to a sustainable and green economy through long-term cross border partnerships between governments and CSOs;
- Promote the region's transition to a circular economy by providing incentives for start-up and green entrepreneurship, which would empower local communities, as well as minorities, such as the Roma, to be part of the process;
- Consider a process of decoupling of ministries in charge of environmental protection from conflicting sectors, such as tourism, infrastructure, and many others, which would avoid any competition in budget/attention between these sectors;
- Initiate a process of banning new initiatives to construct hydropower plants within protected

areas across the region, as well as generally limit as much as possible any construction of hydropower plants;

- Work closely with environmental CSOs in the region to determine suitable or already degraded areas which can be used as sites for renewable energy production, where no harm to biodiversity could be done;
- Initiate a process of needs assessments regarding energy production, which will help to accordingly develop environmental standards. No mining, hydropower, and other forms of energy production, being renewable or not, should be given permission without the finalization of a regional needs assessment;
- Mainstream gender into environmental and relevant intersectional laws, in order to consider women's needs in environmental issues, as well as further empower them to take an active role in environmental protection across the region.

The European Commission should:

- Fund opportunities for CSOs, in partnership with governmental institutions in the region, to support projects that aim to raise awareness across the judicial system regarding environmental justice;
- Allocate necessary funds to conduct relevant assessments that determine suitable or already degraded sites for developing renewable energy. The assessments should be led by environmental CSOs in partnership with WB6 governmental institutions;
- Establish funding programs that target grassroots initiatives throughout the Western Balkan region to support the process of transitioning to a circular economy.

Background: Tougher Nuts to Crack

The intersection between environmental protection and economic development is multilevel and complex, starting from state budgets, circular economies, public investments, state apparatuses, the judiciary, energy production, social inclusion, and gender dimensions. In the previous section, several recommendations were addressed to the WB6 governments and the EU

Commission to pave the way toward a sustainable future. Some of these recommendations align with one another, such as those which focus on energy production. The energy production sector should take into consideration the real needs of the region in terms of quantity of production, from which environmental standards can be developed. Furthermore, even though the transition to renewable energies is one of the region's priorities, certain forms of renewable energy infrastructure can pose a severe threat to the natural environment if situated in protected areas, ecological corridors, or other high value areas for biodiversity.

It is crucial that national institutions which are accountable for environmental protection are not coupled with conflicting sectors, such as tourism or infrastructure. These institutions should be autonomous from one another to fulfill their duty of environmental preservation and management. For example, even though the Serbian Ministry of Tourism is not yet coupled with any conflicting sector, such coupling can happen in the future, as just witnessed in Albania. Furthermore, by collecting funds from taxes and fines related to the polluter-pays principle, these institutions would increase their available budgets, which can fulfill additional needs in terms of staff, equipment, and more.

There is a pressing need to address the economic marginalization of ethnic minorities, such as the Roma, who often face significant barriers to employment and economic advancement. Without the implementation of inclusive and strategic green job creation, these communities risk being further excluded from the transition to a sustainable green economy. Furthermore, the lack of environmental and social impact assessments could lead to detrimental consequences for both people and ecosystems in the region. WB6 governments should incentivize start-ups and green entrepreneurship to strengthen the position of local and marginalized communities, as well as women, in the transition process to a circular economy, which could be done in partnership with CSOs and with appropriate funding from the EU Commission.

There is a lack of environmental awareness within WB6 judicial systems, leading to environmental crimes being treated with less importance than other types of crimes. Raising awareness about environmental crimes is crucial to ensure that they will not go unpunished, which has often been the case

across the region. CSOs can play a crucial role in this process. With proper financial support from the EU Commission, these organizations could drive a significant shift toward achieving environmental justice in the region.

Stocktaking and Future of the Berlin Process

Assessment:

The Berlin Process (BP) constitutes a vital platform to enhance WB6 cooperation and push forward regional policies essential for EU integration. Yet some issues persist in the region, such as those related to the rule of law, corruption, as well as a general lack of political will to undertake important measures. These issues have also been persistent within the theme of this working group, where corruption and rule of law issues related to environmental protection were identified and analyzed.

Recommendations:

WB6 governments should:

- Intensify their efforts to fight against corruption generally, and specifically to issues related to the environment, which often are sidelined as being of secondary importance. Corruption related to environmental protection is a widespread practice throughout the region, witnessed in EIA and SEA procedures, strategic investments in protected areas, law changes for clientelist purposes, and more.

The European Commission and the BP partner countries should:

- Address the absence of the rule of law in environment-related decision-making processes and policy creation with WB6 governments, such as in EU Commission Country Reports. The absence of the rule of law is a core issue with a significant negative impact on nature and environmental protection. The institutions and authorities that are responsible for the implementation of laws ignore and/or even breach legal provisions, followed by a similar approach by the national courts. There are many examples of such practices, such as EIA and SEA procedures, environmental permits and pollution control, spatial planning, "tailored" laws, strategies and management plans for protected areas, etc.;

- Ensure timely and meaningful inclusion of WB6 CSOs in the envisaged update of the GAWB Action Plan, with proper application of the Aarhus Convention standards for public participation; establishment of national GAWB monitoring teams composed of governmental representatives, CSOs, local authorities, and other relevant stakeholders; as well as establishment of an easily accessible channel for participation of CSOs and other stakeholders in all GAWB processes as a matter of urgency;
- Monitor and include the implementation of the Green Agenda in the Country Progress Reports for the respective WB6 countries.

Conclusions from the Preparatory Forum in July 2024

The recommendations presented in this report constitute the shared opinions of the working group members. One issue that generated debate within the working group was related to whether a regional ban for hydropower plants should be implemented, or whether it should be applied only within protected areas in the respective WB6 countries. Even though the majority within the group welcomed the idea of pushing forward a recommendation for a regional ban within and outside protected areas, this opinion was not shared by all participants.

Another issue that generated debate was related to whether the decoupling of the ministries in charge of environmental protection from conflicting sectors should be recommended. Again, even though most of the participants agreed with the recommendation, unanimity was not reached.

A common concern within the working group was related to the absence of the rule of law and especially to corruption in environmental issues, which were seen to be persistent across the WB6 countries. Even though the fight against corruption is a priority for the region as it progresses toward EU membership, these cases still persist. Corruption in environmental issues is particularly troubling, as it directly impacts the region's natural resources, biodiversity, as well as public health. It is crucial for the WB6 governments to increase efforts to fight corruption in environmental issues, to pave the way toward a sustainable future, where nature and economic development can coexist in harmony.

Working Group G: Disinformation and Cyber Threats

Building Resilience

Rapporteurs: Vojislav Raonić, Olivera Nikolić | Montenegro Media Institute (MMI)

Introduction

Current geopolitical uncertainty significantly increases the level of instability, disinformation threats, and cyberattack risks in the traditionally vulnerable Western Balkan region. External malign influences, but also from actors within the region, actively exploit regional divisions. While not all Western Balkan Six (WB6) countries are aligned with EU foreign policy, this strategy easily finds allies among extreme nationalists and historical revisionists. Disinformation and harmful speech circulating on both social and traditional media requires robust multistakeholder responses and commitment from the EU, WB6 governments, and civil society actors.

In addressing the influence of large online platforms, the EU should assist in developing modalities to ensure online platforms comply with the Digital Services Act (DSA), also in the WB6.¹ This approach would ensure equal protection for all European citizens. Western Balkans regulatory framework revisions aimed at promoting quality content require close scrutiny to strike the right balance between freedom of expression and its abuse.

At the same time, rapid digitalization and increasing cyber threats make it necessary to focus on strengthening cyber resilience. Foreign malign influence in the WB6 should be exposed by debunking and mapping the flow of disinformation propaganda from external and Western Balkan regional actors. Additional support for free and independent media is one of the core recommendations of the working group.

The working group identified specific subtopics such as:

- Disinformation and foreign influence;
- Alignment with the DSA and European Media Freedom Act (EMFA);²
- Cybersecurity and cyber threats;
- Media freedom;
- Regulatory framework and policy development;
- Media and digital literacy.

The overarching recommendation is that these problems require a systemic multisectoral approach involving collaboration across state actors, society, media, and civil society organizations (CSOs) to develop effective and sustainable policies and mechanisms to combat disinformation and strengthen cybersecurity in the region.

1 Official Journal of the European Union, Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council on a Single Market For Digital Services and Amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act), October 19, 2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32022R2065> (accessed July 26, 2024).

2 European Commission, Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council Establishing a Common Framework for Media Services in the internal market (European Media Freedom Act) and Amending Directive 2010/13/EU, September 16, 2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52022PC0457> (accessed July 26, 2024).

Recommendations: Low-Hanging Fruit

WB6 governments should:

- Develop and adopt country-specific roadmaps for aligning with the DSA and the EMFA;
- Ensure that any revisions of the regulatory framework will strike the balance between freedom of expression and preventing the dissemination of illegal or harmful content;
- Design policies to strengthen media and digital literacy through formal and informal education in close collaboration with the civil sector;
- Ensure that youth and minority representatives have a seat and a mandate in media regulatory bodies.

The EU and member states should:

- Regularly assess the practice of disinformation spread and regional spillover of malign influence, including election interference among the WB6, within the Chapter 10: “Digital transformation and media” in the progress reports for each Western Balkan country;
- Examine modalities for very large online platforms (VLOPs) to appoint regional legal representatives and designated contact points for communication with WB6 governments and civil society;
- Increase funding aimed to upgrade WB6 CSOs’ know-how and operational capacities for work in the field of cybersecurity to assess the alignment of WB6 countries with the Berlin Declaration on Digital Society and Digital Value-Based Government;³
- Increase existing support for a multistakeholder network of civil society and media organizations, including fact-checking and news outlets;

- Help upgrade the financial and human resources capacities of the Regional Cyber Security Center in Montenegro and establish a dedicated EU Cybersecurity Fund for the Western Balkans, making the center a well-funded hub for regional knowledge sharing, training, and collaboration.⁴

CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans should:

- Effectively use increased EU funding support to mitigate harmful speech and anti-disinformation activities, including research, capacity building, media and digital literacy, cybersecurity, fact-checking, investigative journalism, and advocacy to build societal resilience;
- Develop and implement informal educational programs for media and digital literacy, especially targeting minorities, youth, the elderly, and rural communities;
- Create new and enhance existing local and regional networks to detect disinformation and hate speech and implement EU-funded projects that will improve the capacity of local and community media to independently produce credible news content;
- Invest in efforts to create and run national and regional public advocacy campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of media and digital literacy.

Background: Low-Hanging Fruit

The above recommendations respond to various forms of overlaps and differences between hate speech and disinformation.⁵ The working group deemed these as crucial steps to address disinformation, foreign malign influence, cybersecurity threats, and alignment with key European legislative frameworks in the Western Balkans. These “low-hanging fruit” recommendations are feasible, offer immediate

3 Council of the European Union, Berlin Declaration on Digital Society and Value-Based Digital Government, December 8, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/isa2/sites/isa/files/cdr_20201207_eu2020_berlin_declaration_on_digital_society_and_value-based_digital_government_.pdf (accessed July 26, 2024).

4 European Commission, Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II) 2014-2020. EU Support to Cybersecurity Capacity Building in the Western Balkans, March 16, 2014, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/1fb8ced5-0608-4083-a2cf-39d87426e302_en (accessed July 26, 2024).

5 Claire Wardle, A Conceptual Analysis of the Overlaps and Differences between Hate Speech, Misinformation and Disinformation, United Nations, June 2024, https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/report_-_a_conceptual_analysis_of_the_overlaps_and_differences_between_hate_speech_misinformation_and_disinformation_june_2024.pdf (accessed July 26, 2024).

benefits, and build on existing regional initiatives and capacities.

Aligning with the DSA and the EMFA is crucial for creating a cohesive regulatory environment in the Western Balkans. Country-specific roadmaps, developed in consultation with civil society and media institutions, would ensure local adaptation while maintaining EU standards.

The proposed regular assessment of the WB6 regarding disinformation spread and regional spillover of malign influence, within the chapter 10: “Digital transformation and media” of the progress reports for each Western Balkan country, would require intensified political dialogue and proactive safeguarding of democratic processes.

By investing in research, capacity building, media and digital literacy, cybersecurity, fact-checking, investigative journalism, and advocacy, the EU can empower local actors to address these challenges effectively. This investment would enhance societal resilience and help develop a more informed public capable of resisting disinformation and contributing to a healthier information ecosystem.

Additionally, enhancing the capacity of the Regional Cybersecurity Center in Montenegro and establishing a dedicated EU Cybersecurity Fund would fortify the region's defenses against cyber threats.

These multistakeholder initiatives, combined with increased support for media and digital literacy programs targeting vulnerable populations, would build a more resilient and informed society.

Recommendations: Tougher Nuts to Crack

WB6 governments should:

- Cooperate closely with the EU and NATO and access their expertise in creating resilience and response strategies. In particular, increase cooperation with specialized agencies to build national and regional mechanisms to combat disinformation in the context of new hybrid threats;
- Establish regional cooperation through initiatives, such as the Central European Free Trade Agree-

ment Decision on Facilitation of Electronic Commerce;

- Establish cooperation between regional Computer Emergency Response Teams (CERTs). Sharing information and knowledge can enhance cybersecurity both regionally and within individual countries;
- Closely cooperate with relevant CSOs to develop curricula and make media and digital literacy a mandatory part of formal education from an early age, including kindergarten, primary, and secondary schools.

The EU and member states should:

- Advocate with VLOPs and very large online search engines (VLSEs) to appoint regional legal representatives and designated contact points and expand the Code of Practice against Disinformation Commitments (COP) to the Western Balkans;
- Assist WB6 governments that are willing to participate in NATO programs launched to analyze the information space, such as “Setting the Record Straight”, to detect trends in disinformation, react more quickly, and develop cooperation with the European External Action Service and EUvsDisinfo, contributing to investigations on foreign information manipulation and interference threats;⁶
- Provide funding support to WB6 CSOs aimed to create a regional Cybersecurity Alliance under the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) umbrella;
- Support the membership of the WB6 in the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA).

CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans should:

- Actively participate in the drafting process of relevant legal initiatives together with media, academics, and think tanks to ensure that media freedom and the improvement of journalistic professional standards is a strategic goal in all Western Balkan countries;

⁶ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Setting the Record Straight. De-Bunking Russian Disinformation on NATO, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/115204.htm> (accessed July 26, 2024); EUvsDisinfo, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/> (accessed July 26, 2024).

- Develop and implement educational programs for all public sector and government staff, including local administrations, and provide basic training in digital literacy and cybersecurity.

Background: Tougher Nuts to Crack

The nature of the “tougher nuts to crack” recommendations, combined with the fact that not all WB6 countries are fully aligned with EU foreign policy, would require enhanced EU political engagement. Closer cooperation of WB6 governments with the EU and NATO to tackle disinformation and foreign influence is needed to enable willing countries to develop resilience and response strategies.

Also, Western Balkan states must ensure that regulatory frameworks addressing illegal content and disinformation are proportional and aligned with the EMFA and EU acquis.

Treating the Western Balkan region as a single digital market would ensure uniform regulatory measures, enhancing the digital market’s efficiency and integrity. Initiatives like the Decision on Facilitation of Electronic Commerce would help WB6 governments align with EU standards, simplifying regulatory compliance and boosting the digital economy.

Supporting the membership of the WB6 in the ENISA is vital for enhancing regional cybersecurity. This membership would provide access to ENISA’s resources and expertise, raising cybersecurity standards across the region. Additionally, EU support for CSOs to create a regional Cybersecurity Alliance under the RCC would facilitate collaboration among CSOs, private sector companies, and academic institutions.⁷ Governments should also foster cooperation between CERTs to improve their ability to respond to cyber incidents.

Engaging media, CSOs, academics, and think tanks in the legislation drafting process ensures transparency and inclusivity, fostering a regulatory environment that supports free and responsible journalism.

Commulative, these measures would ensure a robust cybersecurity posture, protecting critical infrastructure and citizens from cyber threats.

Stocktaking and Future of the Berlin Process Assessment:

Over the past decade, the Berlin Process (BP) has focused primarily on regional cooperation issues to promote the Western Balkan region’s economic development and help reconciliation between the societies of the WB6 to escape from antagonizing rhetoric. For these reasons, the BP has never lost its focus on the importance of free and independent media. Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the BP has significantly advanced its agenda in combating disinformation, bolstering media independence, addressing information disorder, promoting digitalization and connectivity, and mitigating cyber threats.

Notable achievements include the establishment of the 2023 Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans, which set clear standards and goals for regional cooperation. The continuity in the agenda, maintained through annual summits, ensured a sustained focus on these critical issues.

Civil society has been offered a generous opportunity to formulate thematic recommendations on combating information disorder, including the region in EU cybersecurity mechanisms, strengthening media independence, and digitalization and connectivity.

Suggestions are proposed to mitigate the lack of accountability of tech platforms, whose business models incentivize and deepen the information disorder while at the same time fail to offer functional mechanisms to protect WB6 citizens from harmful content.

Major successes include enhanced cross-border digital infrastructure, collaborative cybersecurity frameworks, and increased resilience against information manipulation.

The BP’s accomplishments lay a robust foundation for future efforts, reflecting a decade-long commitment to creating a more secure and digitally connected region. This positive assessment underscores the need for continued vigilance and innovation to address emerging challenges and to build on the progress already achieved.

⁷ Regional Cooperation Council, Cyber Security and CSIRTS, https://www.rcc.int/working_groups/58/cyber-security-and-csirts (accessed July 26, 2024).

Recommendations:

The Berlin Process partner countries should:

- Ensure the continuity of efforts to advocate for a synchronized regional approach to alignment with relevant EU legislation on media freedoms and digital services. To this end, it is also recommended to facilitate further dialogue, stronger alliances, and better coordination between key actors addressed by the same recommendations;
- Use their political authority and continue advocating for media freedom at all political levels. The BP should also advocate for information integrity to be placed higher on the list of priorities in the EU accession process. This advocating should be done in conjunction with specific mechanisms that hold the WB6 governments accountable for failing to deliver on their commitments;
- Continue lending leverage to regional coordination and a streamlined approach to online platforms in delivering the region's needs and demands and ensuring the effective protection of its citizens from online harms;
- Continue supporting CSOs in building partnerships inside and outside the region to develop and implement effective and sustainable policies and mechanisms aimed at empowering users to identify disinformation and develop preemptive strategies for fighting disinformation and foreign malign influence.

Conclusions from the Preparatory Forum in July 2024

During the Preparatory Forum, the working group for “Disinformation and Cyber Threats” actively discussed various issues in the subject area which cast a shadow over the Western Balkan region and each of the WB6 individually.

The common denominator on almost all subtopics discussed was that the situation requires a systemic and cross-sectoral approach with close cooperation between governments, regulators, public institutions, civil society actors, academics, and think tanks in each country and also regionally.

The group easily reached a consensus that pressing issues require close regional cooperation. As most of the WB6 countries fall into the category of unconsolidated democracies, all participants highlighted the role of the EU, its member states, and regional international organizations. Almost all of the working group recommendations deemed assistance from the EU and the political leverage of the BP essential.

The nature of recommendations clearly recognizes the EU’s role as a counterbalance to the sometimes-obvious lack of political will of WB6 political elites to act in accordance with European scale of values.

Working group participants from CSOs recognized the spillover effect and agreed that the pressing issues of foreign interference and disinformation are aggregated by the traditional practice of malign influence among WB6 countries, which creates regional information disarray.

Another typical reason for the close regional cooperation is a recommendation to the European Commission to require VLSEs to appoint regional legal representatives and designated contact points and expand the COP to the Western Balkans. The European Commission is also recommended to ensure a region-wide approach in applying the DSA and similar regulations, treating the Western Balkan region as a single digital market.

A gradual, realistic approach is highlighted through “low hanging fruit” recommendations intended to build capacities and multistakeholder alliances, such as strengthening cybersecurity capacities. This approach has to be followed by “tougher nuts to crack” recommendations asking for close integration into existing relevant European structures.

Given that free, sustainable, and independent media is the best guarantor against disinformation, working group members agreed that any regulatory or legal initiative be proportional and fully aligned with the EMFA.

The necessity to further upgrade media and digital literacy in the region, with a focus on the young population, remained a consensual recommendation toward a more secure and democratic Western Balkan region.

