



The 'Berlin Process' for the Western Balkans – Is it delivering?

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We agree that today's conference should provide a framework for a period of four years, during which we will further our endeavours to make additional real progress in the reform process, in resolving outstanding bilateral and internal issues, and in achieving reconciliation within and between the societies in the region.

Extract from Final declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans,
28 August 2014

When Chancellor Merkel launched her initiative to host the first conference on the Western Balkans in August 2014 as part of what became known as the Berlin Process, it was warmly welcomed by the countries of the Western Balkan region. The initiative was particularly timely as it helped to assuage wounded feelings in the region arising from the statement made in the previous month by the then Commission President designate Jean-Claude Juncker that there would be no new enlargement of the EU during the five-year mandate of the Commission. While technically correct, the statement was interpreted by many as undermining the EU's commitment to the accession aspirations of the countries in that region.

The summit hosted by Italy in Trieste this month was the fourth in the series, after Vienna in 2015 and Paris in 2016.

Although taking place outside of the normal EU institutional decision-making process, and with only seven EU member states in attendance, these successive summits have had the merit of maintaining a focus on the region and bringing all the leaders of the Western Balkan countries around the same table. Side events have also been organised with representatives from the business community and civil society organisations. But beyond the annual pageantry, there has been precious little intermediate follow-up at the intergovernmental level.

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The summit discussions have given priority to economic cooperation within the region, in particular connectivity in the energy, transport and digital sectors, including the pan-European corridors. Connectivity became the buzzword in the Berlin Process, with promises of greater efforts to modernise the transport infrastructure linking the countries of the region and at the same time stimulating the creation of jobs, also through the creation of a 'Regional Economic Area'.

Dashed hopes and expectations

In terms of practical outputs and concrete projects for the region, however, the result of the Berlin Process three-quarters down the line is rather thin. The lofty promises and commitments made by the assembled leaders have remained mostly on paper only. Even the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Council, which was agreed at the Paris summit, has had difficulty in getting off the ground due to governments in the region dragging their feet in providing the necessary resources. The suggestion that increasing connectivity and trade within the region would by themselves stimulate economic growth has not been borne out by the reality on the ground so far.

There was also an overly optimistic approach that stimulating economic growth would automatically be accompanied by increased efforts on rule of law and legal standards. Unfortunately this did not happen. As the annual country reports from the European Commission have highlighted, the region has witnessed a dramatic deterioration in democratic governance and the rule of law, despite the fact that in 2011 rule of law issues were placed at the heart of the accession process. In its 2016 Communication on the EU enlargement policy, the Commission referred to several countries in the region continuing to show "clear symptoms and varying degrees of state capture".

Events of the past year have shown just how fragile the region remains, with weak state institutions, increased erosion of the democratic checks and balances, alarming levels of corruption and unchecked authoritarian tendencies in some of the countries. Probably the worst example was in Macedonia, with a political crisis that has only grown worse over the years.

Underwhelming performance on the part of the EU

The EU's role in that crisis does not offer a good example of conflict management. Indeed, the EU bears a lot of the responsibility for failing to grasp the depth of the crisis in time and not heeding the warning signs that were clearly visible for several years. The Council even kept endorsing the repeatedly used phrase in the country reports for Macedonia – "the Commission considers that the political criteria continue to be sufficiently met" – despite glaring evidence to the contrary. This failure to intervene in a timely and convincing manner was replicated across the region, whether it was parliamentary boycotts in Albania, the increased tensions between Serbia and Kosovo, the growing threats to the constitutional order in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or suppression of free media and the blurring of the separation of powers in Serbia.

The EU did not revise its policies or raise its profile. On the contrary, it degraded its profile at the highest political level: even if heavy-hitters like German Chancellor Merkel, French President Macron and Italian Prime Minister Gentiloni attended this year's summit in Trieste, the heads of state or government of 21 EU countries have not owned up to the Berlin Process. In fact, the Process has come at the expense of the fully-fledged EU-Western Balkans Summit, which last met in 2013.

At the monitoring level too, the European Commission gave the impression of simply going through the motions of engaging with the countries of the region through its annual country reports and very periodic visits of its highest officials. Some countries did move up the EU accession ladder, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership application being accepted, but this had little impact on domestic politics.

Although the annual country reports became increasingly critical, reflecting the deterioration in democratic standards overall, there was no re-calibration of the EU's approach, which one would have expected. The political vision of the EU to integrate the Western Balkans, as reflected in the 2003 Thessaloniki Agenda, simply got lost in the technocratic language of ticking boxes in the list of reforms required for EU accession. This meant that the deep rooted symptoms of malaise in the region were not given the attention they deserved.

The refugee and migrant crisis of 2015 dominated discussions with the leaders of those Balkan states in the frontline of the flow of migrants, with both the EU institutions and individual EU member states, such as Austria and Hungary, placing priority on obtaining cooperation in border control while relegating rule of law and good governance issues to the back page. This change in focus further contributed to the disconnect between the different EU institutions in their discourse with the countries of the region and inconsistency in the messages conveyed.

Even on bilateral disputes, despite repeated pledges by both the EU and the countries of the region, there has been no progress. The latest stand-off between Croatia and Slovenia, with Croatia refusing to accept the Court of Arbitration's ruling on the maritime border demarcation in the Bay of Piran does not set a good example to the region. Unresolved disputes, such as those between Croatia and its other Western Balkan neighbours and between Macedonia and Greece, undermine the credibility of the EU enlargement process itself and of the member states directly concerned.

A long-neglected region

The visit of the High Representative Federica Mogherini to the region in early March, her first visit to some of the countries since taking up office in 2014, was long overdue. It finally brought home to EU leaders the realisation that the Western Balkan region, which is entirely surrounded by EU member states, cannot be taken for granted. A region that continues to produce more history than it can absorb needs careful nurturing and a more inclusive and 'hands-on' approach from the EU than it has heretofore received.

The fragility of state institutions, deeply polarised societies, outbreaks of violence and potential conflict situations whether inter or intra state, with powerful elites determined to maintain their grip on power, require the EU to take a much more political and strategic approach. As a priority it needs to extend the dialogue beyond the entrenched political elites to include civil society actors and local communities. Their voices need to be heard and taken into account not at the end of a process, but right at the beginning.

In the most recent Joint Communication entitled “A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU’s External Action”, the European Commission and the High Representative highlight the EU’s determination to “strengthen work on conflict prevention and peacebuilding” and to “give greater weight in its conflict assessment methodology to local capacities to deal with risks”.

This is particularly relevant for the Western Balkan region, with its societies that have been through conflict and are still struggling with deep-rooted issues of nation building, reconciliation and good governance. Yet it is precisely in this region that the EU institutions have failed to translate their aspirations into action. This is despite the fact that it was in that same region that the EU successfully fielded some of its newly created security and defence policy instruments back in 2003.

The EU needs to regain the ground it has lost over the years since then. The Western Balkans constitute the number 1 geopolitical challenge to the European Union. If the EU fails in the Balkans, its credibility as a global actor will be lost forever. Seen through this prism, the decision to prioritise the Western Balkans in the implementation plan of the EU Global Strategy is to be welcomed. The EU has all the necessary tools at its disposal to restore credibility to its enlargement policy and its relationship with the countries of the region.

Although probably not conceived as such, the Berlin Process filled a vacuum left by the EU institutions. But it has fallen short in delivering on its stated ambitions, i.e. to make “additional real progress in the reform process, in resolving outstanding bilateral and internal issues, and in achieving reconciliation within and between the societies in the region”.

Time for the EU to raise the bar

It is high time that the EU radically changes its approach to the Western Balkans and raises its visibility and political profile in the region. Rather than embracing German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel’s suggestion of a ‘Berlin Plus’, which would follow on from the current Process and beef it up with, inter alia, a fund for infrastructure and technology, the leaders assembled at the Trieste summit should have questioned whether such promises will have real added value to what the EU has been able to muster up to now. London, which after the Brexit vote has become a counter-intuitive venue to host the final conference in 2018 to discuss deeper regional integration with a view to EU membership, offers an opportunity to turn the Berlin Process into a strategic affairs forum for the Western Balkans.

With the prospect of Brexit to materialise at the end of March 2019, the EU27 should reinstate its bilateral Western Balkans Summit later that year in order to provide the pre-accession process with the political thrust it needs at the highest political level. For their part, EU institutions should show greater determination in putting in place effective monitoring mechanisms that will guarantee proper implementation of the commitments and EU-related reforms by the countries of the region. Those countries that continue to violate the basic standards of democratic governance and fail to fulfil their reform commitments should be put on notice. This presupposes of course that individual EU member states are on the same wave length.