



Practicing less is more: Choices for the future of the Berlin Process. View from 2025

Edited by Zoran Nechev and Adnan Cerimagic

With contributions by: Jelica Minic, Besnik Baka, Jovana Marovic, Donika Emimi,
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Introduction

In August 2014, during the first meeting within the Berlin Process, participants agreed that it “should provide a framework for a period of four years,” until 2018.¹ In July 2019, however, the Poznan Summit is taking place, thus, making it the first one outside the originally envisaged schedule. This alone illustrates that the Berlin Process is alive and there is demand for it.

Most participants and observers agree that the Berlin Process has a role in the relations between countries and societies from the Western Balkans and the EU. It contributes to bridging the gap between the region and the EU. It manages to tackle some practical issues like facilitating people-to-people communication by eliminating roaming charges in the summer of 2021. The extension of the Berlin Process is something that is welcomed by political leaders and appreciated by civil society in the region. At the same time, many of the stakeholders involved also call for its restructuring in order to reflect the reality on the ground and the projected direction

of the enlargement policy based on the number of strategies and declarations specifically drafted for the region.

Since 2014 much has been achieved. A number of programs, initiatives and actions have been undertaken, the business, civil society and since Poznan - the think tank forum have become an integral part of the agenda. Civil society members attend the meetings of the MFAs, advancement in the domain of bilateral issues has been made and one of the bilateral issues mentioned in the Berlin Declaration has been resolved. The Regional Youth Cooperation Office and the Western Balkan Fund have been established and operate with continuously increasing budgets. At the same time, the Berlin Process has entered into a phase of uncharted waters, with no clear timeline and perspective for future host countries. Local ownership expressed through initiatives by the Western Balkan countries to host or co-host the Berlin Process is still lacking although attempts at organizing



¹ <https://archiv.bundesregierung.de/archiv-de/meta/startseite/final-declaration-by-the-chair-of-the-conference-on-the-western-balkans-754634>

- ▶ half-way mini summits have been made, however, without continuity.

So, what could the Berlin Process look like in the next years? Could we see the Berlin Process taking place in 2025 in Srebrenica, Copenhagen or Ohrid? What would be needed?

In this discussion paper, the SEE Think Net Network contributing authors look at the possible scenarios for the future of the Berlin Process by 2025 and propose improvements.² The authors are of the opinion that the Berlin Process should continue in the future, thereby increasing the number of countries from the EU engaged with and interested in the Western Balkan region. The paper also reflects, at least partially, on a paper written by BIEPAG members in 2017.³

Context

The starting point for the following Berlin Process scenarios is that until 2025 none of the six Western Balkan countries would become a member of the EU, but that four of them could be close to finalising their membership negotiations. The scenarios are, therefore, also based on the assumption that the accession process would continue to be slow. Furthermore, the last couple of years have seen increased differentiation within the EU itself, with all the risks and benefits associated with it. Differentiation has become the new normal for the functioning of the EU which had a direct impact also on the accession process as such. The Berlin Process contributed to the external differentiation embedded

² The SEE Think Net Network was established in mid-March 2018 with the generous support of the European Fund for the Balkans as the first regional network composed of civil society organisations that aim to monitor the topics related to the Berlin Process. The Network encompasses think tanks, civil society organisations and individuals from the 6 Western Balkan countries plus Croatia and Slovenia. Besides the Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” (IDSCS) which coordinates the Network, the SEE Think Net Network includes the Network of the European Movement in Serbia (NEMinS), Open Society Foundation for Albania and its affiliate, the EU Policy Hub, Adnan Ćerimagić, Politikon Network from Montenegro, Kosovo Centre for Security Studies, the Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO) from Croatia and the Centre for European Perspective (CEP) from Slovenia. For more information, please visit: <https://idscs.org.mk/en/2018/06/26/see-think-net-berlin-process/>

³ <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/The-Future-of-the-Berlin-Process.pdf>

in the various forms of cooperation and association between the EU and Western Balkan countries especially in the area of security, including migration and connectivity. The EU accession process through its flagship initiatives mentioned for the first time in the 6 February 2018 EC Communication *A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*⁴ (as four of six Flagship Initiatives) and the 17 May 2018 Sofia Declaration of the EU-Western Balkans Summit⁵ (as four of six Priority Agenda items) has absorbed some of the topics tackled by the Berlin Process. In this sense, regional cooperation continued to expand contributing to the overall resilience of the region vis-à-vis other external actors.

Rationalized and focused Berlin Process

To commemorate the 30th anniversary since the 1995 genocide, in July 2025 Srebrenica has been chosen to host the 2025 Summit within the Berlin Process. During the first half of 2025, the Netherlands, co-host of the Summit, have already organised numerous events throughout the EU promoting the economic potential of the Western Balkans and EU's ever-deeper relations with the region.

In Srebrenica, EU and Western Balkan leaders are expected to celebrate their achievements with connectivity and digital agenda. The region is moving fast ▶

⁴ European Commission, 2018., *A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, (COM 2018) 65 final. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf

⁵ European Commission, 2018, *Sofia Declaration of the EU-Western Balkans Summit*, 17 May 2018 https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/34776/sofia-declaration_en.pdf

► towards completing most infrastructure projects, with by 2025 almost all of the Western Balkan capitals being connected with highways and railroads. By 2023, all Western Balkan countries have finalised their border agreements and demarcation, which was a pre-condition for financial support continuation. Roaming in the region and with the EU is part of history and due to improved digital infrastructure and initiatives launched through the Berlin Process, the IT sector is growing at a fast pace.

In Srebrenica, the Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council is expected to announce that all six Western Balkan countries have aligned themselves fully with EU legislation and standards linked to a single market, which will mark the final stage in setting up of the Regional Economic Area and open access to EU funds, previously reserved for EU members. This is the second area where full alignment of all six states has been achieved (first being public procurement in 2023). Environment is expected to be next area.

With the help of the Netherlands and Austria (co-host in 2024), Western Balkan leaders are expected to sign a joint declaration on moving forward with modernisation of agriculture, food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy and tourism sectors. The Netherlands, a country with experience in modernisation of agriculture, and Austria, a country with experience in booming tourism, have both pledged significant additional financial and technical support for the six Western Balkan countries in these two areas with hope to further integrate the Western Balkans with the EU.

The road to 2025 was not an easy one. In 2019, at the Poznan Summit, the mood was already going in direction of continuing and boosting the Berlin Process. At the 2020 Summit, agreement was reached on co-organisation of the Berlin Process, with one EU member state and one Western Balkan state co-hosting every year. An attempt was made for each year to have an EU member state from another region being co-host: Nordics, Central and Eastern

Europe, Southern Europe, Benelux, etc. Co-hosts were announced for three years in advance and with every year RCC's role increased. This has secured some predictability but also left space for much needed flexibility. Furthermore, additional meetings between the EU and the Western Balkans were organised at a bi-annual period: Sofia in 2018, Zagreb in 2020, Prague in 2022, Budapest in 2024 (linked to the Council Presidency).

It was the Berlin Process that kick-started and accelerated the process of faster alignment of Western Balkan countries with EU standards, with focus being put on public procurement, common market and environment. Several EU member states, led by Germany, France and the Netherlands, pledged significant additional funds for those countries that made progress. This was an instrument to foremost counter the negative consequences of investment inflow from third countries, but also a way to respond to fading motivation in the region to align with EU standards without fast membership perspective. For

each summit, the European Commission together with RCC and civil society, produced strict reports on progress made in alignment with EU standards in key areas. Allocation of additional funds made by several EU member states was linked to progress observed in those reports, which created a positive dynamic.

More of the same

In July 2025, the Berlin Process went to Copenhagen. Since 2020, the Berlin Process meetings were hosted by EU member states holding the presidency of the Council of the EU. The Berlin Process turned into a platform where regional and individual countries' successes were presented and promoted. This is also how topics for the meetings were decided on.

Each Western Balkan government had something positive to report since by 2025 so many new topics have been discussed and declarations signed. In 2025, the main focus was on road safety. Since 2014, six Western Balkan states have managed to halve the number of deaths and injuries on Western Balkan roads. The Berlin Process and investments in connectivity agenda have played an important role in this achievement. Initiatives such as Regional

Economic Area, connectivity and digital agenda, however, moved forward at a slow pace and are ongoing but without many concrete results. It took several years since signing the Agreement in 2019 for the Transport Community Treaty Permanent Secretariat to become operational.

Since 2019, the Berlin Process has continued to serve as a platform where EU leaders tried to motivate and pressure leaders of the Western Balkans to resolve their differences and move forward. Topics related to bilateral disputes and reconciliation found their place in sessions behind closed doors, but with little or no success to report about. Over the years, the Berlin Process also focused on encouraging the Western Balkans to work on the Regional Economic Area by providing additional funds for the region and opening various EU programs and initiatives. Furthermore, the Process focused on boosting reforms in transport, energy and environment regulation. In particular, cooperation in natural resources

management, tourism and culture has been discussed. Support for RYCO continued and has showed results in the overall perception of young people across the region.

The introduction of an unwritten rule that the Berlin Process goes to the EU member state holding the presidency in the Council brought some predictability to the process, but it continued to be a non-institutionalized and flexible format managed to feed the accession process with substantial inputs in a number of sectors and to enhance regional cooperation. This approach has also led to a growing number of the EU Member States being involved and has generated some results in increasing the understanding, support and discovery of member states' individual interests for cooperation with the region. Over the years, each of them launched a specific initiative in the areas important for the future membership of the candidate and potential candidates.

The list of criticism for the process continued to be more or less unchanged, main chunk being that the process lacked clear strategic approach and focus, as well as that it had poor monitoring, screening and reporting of results.

In reality, it bought time for the slow and increasingly accession unfriendly Brussels institutions. It helped melt different interests, perspectives, resources offering some new modalities and networking opportunities in the EU and Western Balkans relations. Moreover, it relaxed the prevailing reluctance of member states to offer some new, although fragmented, integration opportunities to Western Balkan partners.

Over the years, the Berlin Process introduced a multi-layer accession with the Western Balkans all together gradually integrating in the EU and among themselves in specific sectors, while at the same time continuing the slow formal accession process as individual countries.

Fading away

The annual meeting of the Berlin Process in July 2025 took place in a newly built conference centre at the Lake Prespa in North Macedonia. The meeting was chaired by the Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council. Participants, almost exclusively representatives of the Western Balkans, were welcomed with recorded video messages of the German foreign minister, French secretary for Europe and European Commission's director for the Western Balkans. In the run-up to the meeting, the RCC spent most of the time on striking consensus about how Kosovo would be represented and if the state-level government would represent Bosnia-Herzegovina.

At the 2025 meeting in Ohrid, the RCC encouraged leaders of the Western Balkans to agree on next steps towards the Regional Economic Area, as well as to discuss what was achieved on connectivity and digital agenda. They are expected to sign a joint

declaration confirming their support for the work of RYCO and commit to consider possible additional funding as of 2035. Bilateral disputes and reconciliation, as requested by a number of governments, was not discussed. For the third time, representatives of Russian, Chinese and Turkish economic and transport ministries joined the meeting and shared their vision for the region.

Since 2019, the level of enthusiasm for the Berlin Process in the EU decreased. Leaders of the Western Balkans increasingly used annual meetings to bring their domestic and bilateral issues into the spot light with several political and diplomatic scandals. So, a divided EU with decreasing political interest in the Western Balkans by 2022 decided to transfer the Berlin Process to the RCC, quoting the need for a stronger local ownership.

The RCC, due to its own constraints, was unable to bring new topics on the table or create the much needed dynamic to implement what was agreed. It was unable

to influence the resolution of bilateral disputes and as time passed by, it often struggled to even protect the achieved level of regional cooperation. The RCC struggled with identifying and bringing more donors on board, so it turned to third actors such as Turkey, Russia and China. Their investments were attracted with the negative rule of law situation and absence of EU standards. Without a clear membership perspective and with lost interest for the Berlin Process, the EU lost leverage in the Western Balkans.

Conclusion

Since 2014, the Berlin process has served its initial purpose. The time has, however, come for the Process to be streamlined in order to serve the new realities on the ground, in the Western Balkans and the EU, following the publication of the credible enlargement perspective, including its six flagship initiatives and the attempt (hopefully it will continue) to organise an EU-Western Balkans Summit every two years.

Rationalized approach is needed to maintain and further develop the track record that it has had over the past years. The practice of having new EU member states as a host each year should continue since, as in the case with Poland, it manages to mobilise the administration, civil society, think tanks and businesses in host countries and strengthen the ties between the country concerned and the region. The developed relations through the organisation of the Summit in Poznan will only further develop in the future. In addition, it also managed ▶

► to bring the other countries from the Visegrad group closer and make them more interested about the Western Balkan region. Hopefully, other countries and regions from the EU will join soon. At the same time, however, more local ownership in the Western Balkans is needed. For their own benefit, as they are the primary beneficiaries and for the benefit of their people/constituencies. Organisation of events in the Western Balkans that are built around the Berlin Process should therefore be considered. Inclusion of the RCC should be considered as well.

The Process could benefit from setting up of medium-term goals, such as achieving full alignment with the EU acquis, standards and policies in certain areas. One of the examples could be transport or public procurement. The Berlin Process could set full alignment with EU policy on road safety and public procurement by 2023. A group of interested member states could offer additional financial and technical support

for achieving this goal. Civil society from the region together with the European Commission and RCC could get a role of monitoring the progress.

Leaders in the Western Balkans should refrain from using the Process to conduct political and diplomatic fights with countries in the region, but instead as a platform where regional and individual countries' successes are presented and promoted. With new hosts coming from EU member states where politicians and citizens are not interested in the Western Balkans or its future in the EU, these meetings should dominantly be used to move forward and promote the region.

Information about SEE Think Net

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The SEE Think Net Network was established in mid-march 2018 with the generous support of the European Fund for the Balkans as the first regional network composed of civil society organisations that aim to monitor the topics related to the Berlin Process. The Network encompasses think tanks, civil society organisations and individuals from the 6 Western Balkan countries plus Croatia and Slovenia. Besides the Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” (IDSCS) which will coordinate the Network, the SEE Think Net Network includes the Network of the European Movement in Serbia (NEMinS), Open Society Foundation for Albania and its affiliate, the EU Policy Hub, Adnan Ćerimagić, Politikon Network from Montenegro, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, the Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO) from Croatia and the Centre for European Perspective (CEP) from Slovenia. The goal of the SEE Think Net Network is to produce significant policy inputs and provide policy recommendations on topics that derive from the Berlin Process. As such, its activities are devised in order to closely monitor the Berlin process and the policy areas the process encompasses.

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Information about EFB

The European Fund for the Balkans is designed to create and support initiatives aimed at strengthening democracy and fostering European integration by enabling inclusive policy making, supporting capacity development and creating a platform for exchange and co-operation in the Western Balkans. The Fund was launched in 2007 by four European private foundations (King Baudouin Foundation, Erste Foundation, Robert Bosch Stiftung and the Compagnia di san Paolo), within the framework of the Network of European Foundations.

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Link

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