



BiEPAG

Discussion Paper  
**The Future of the  
Berlin Process**

## The Future of the Berlin Process Discussion Paper

The Berlin Process is the only high-level political venue that exclusively focuses on the six remaining non-EU Western Balkan (WB) countries. Amidst the multiple crises within the EU that distracted the Union from enlargement over the past few years, coupled with an increasingly member states driven approach to enlargement, the Berlin Initiative, promoted since 2014 by the German government, is a much-needed boost in preparing the WB countries for future EU membership by trying to tackle some of the core structural problems in the region. As such, the format of the Berlin Process-hosted EU-WB6 Summit Series should continue beyond the initial 5 years framework set to end in 2018.

In this policy brief, the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) proposes several structural changes to be introduced within the Berlin Process after the 2018 London Summit in order to make it more effective for the countries involved, and more beneficial for their citizens.

The Berlin Process is marked by the mini-intergovernmentalism, meaning it involves the WB countries in addition to Germany, France, Austria, Italy, Slovenia and Croatia, as well as the European Commission and international financial institutions. The process should remain stable in terms of the number of actors involved, as an increase in size bears risk of spoiling the dynamics and hijacking the agenda for self-driven interest. In terms of content, however, the process has been fluid as thus far it included issues of regional cooperation, bilateral issues, and other issues related to youth, migration, connectivity, ecology and most recently rule of law. Preparation of annual summits has not always been transparent, and the selection of annual topics seemed rather as an ad hoc exercise than part of the carefully tailored strategy. As a consequence of vaguely defined goals of the process, WB governments were at liberty to manipulate perceptions of achieved

results in communication with other stakeholders and general public. In the future, it is important to limit and prioritize the number of issues addressed within the Berlin Process so as to avoid the dilution of concrete tasks. Also, it is crucial to avoid duplexing of the accession process, as this makes the European Commission reluctant to substantially engage.

The structure of the Berlin process needs to be modified in order to provide additional top –down pressure to the countries involved and to make it more effective. It would be important to institutionalise the process even further, setting tangible annual milestones to be achieved. In this regard it is crucial to set concrete obligations for the countries involved, beyond the adoption of declarative commitments. The implementation of agreed responsibilities should be regularly monitored throughout the year, and assessed at the Summit, with the possibility to publicly name and shame governments that are lagging behind in implementation.

Doubtlessly, the brunt of the responsibility for the potential success of the Berlin Process rests with the respective regional governments. However, the Berlin process should be used as an opportunity to increase the bottom-up pressure on the governments of the Western Balkans to do their job better by strengthening civil society and giving the organisations a more precise role. The Civil Society and Business Forums organised as side events within the Berlin process need to be integrated into the formal programme of the future summits. These two forums have proven their worthiness. Joint meetings and events between various actors involved, like the one between BiEPAG and the GIZ-supported EU/MFA Networks, are good examples of the potential for success in combining the work of these actors. On the other hand, credible representatives of civil society should be regularly consulted between summits in order to prepare ‘shadow reports’ on the topics covered within the Process.

The potential of the Berlin Process is evident as the number of donors and regional and international organisations engaged in the WB, as well as major European companies, have expressed their interest in it. Yet, on the occasion of the fourth Western Balkans Summit, what has come of the plethora of vital economic revitalisation projects identified at the previous three meetings? Since the start of the Berlin Process in summer 2014, a number of programmes and initiatives have been launched, yet the implementation track record is rather disappointing. In addition, funding instruments cannot be easily redirected to immediately benefit those most in need and affected by the social and economic conditions in the region. To close this gap, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs announced a “Berlin-plus” addition to the Berlin Process in order to be better

equipped to answer to the needs of the region. This opportunity should be used so as to provide more prominent roles to regional organisations and European companies, especially those involved in the connectivity agenda-related issues, in pushing the WB countries to engage more directly and decisively towards the European single market benchmarks.

Regarding the frequency of meetings/summits, the process needs to be upgraded in order to make it a true, year-long process. At the moment, this is not the case. The main summits should continue to be organised in one of EU member state capitals, for visibility purposes, and because that way all political leaders of the EU countries involved will join and participate. However, half-way meetings/mini-summits should be organised in one of the WB capitals, like the one in Sarajevo in May 2017. The rotating presidency of the summits should remain as it is and the same should be applied to the mini summits. This way, half-way mini-summits will demonstrate the local ownership of the process, while leaving the organisation of the main summits in the hands of the EU member states involved in the process.

The success of the Berlin Process, beyond the fact that it feeds into the efforts to keep the WB6 countries engaged in EU accession, has thus far been marked with several tangible outputs of previous summits, most notably the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), and the signing of the Declaration on Regional Cooperation and the Solution of Bilateral Disputes. In order to keep the momentum going, it is crucial that each of the subsequent summits produces one tangible success story that would bring immediate relief to the citizens of the Western Balkans and remind them of the benefits of the European project. One such initiative could be directed towards the adoption of the agreement on inclusion of the WB6 to the European “roam like at home” policy. The potential implementation of such a comprehensive agreement will be fully in line with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), as it would facilitate the gradual alignment of the region's legislation with EU law and standards, thus creating a new impetus for the region's economy in attracting investments. It will additionally prepare the region for its future participation in the EU's single market. Most importantly it will genuinely bring people together as both EU citizens and citizens of the Western Balkan countries would save money when using their phones abroad, especially since there already exists an extensive circulation of people between the EU and the Western Balkans.

Finally, all the efforts made within the framework of the Berlin Process should be primarily focused on fulfilling the Copenhagen Accession Criteria, for example increase

the candidate countries' ability to take on the obligations of membership including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union. This being said, it is important to use this forum to boost the transformative effect of enlargement by insisting on the independence of key state institutions and empowering democratic forces in the WB6 countries.

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**The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group** (BiEPAG) is an open group of policy analysts, scholars and researchers, established as a joint initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans and the Centre for Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz.

The goal of the Group is to support the integration of the Western Balkans in the European Union, and to contribute to the consolidation of democracy in the region, through the facilitation of evidence-based policy dialogue. To this end, BiEPAG is conceptualised as a platform to bring closer the various political and developmental stakeholders of the individual countries of the Western Balkans – on one side, and the bodies and branches of the European Union and the governments of its constituent countries – on the other. Four main methods are used in BiEPAG's work:

- Preparation of research-based proposals for policy measures aimed at the acceleration of reforms and at the democratisation of the Western Balkan countries, as well as at overcoming the enlargement hiatus inside the European Union;
- Dissemination of the recommendations and – with support from BiEPAG's vast network of partners in the European Union and in the Western Balkan countries – the advocacy of the recommended measures at high-level meetings and in expert fora;
- Promotion of expert debate – through bringing together policy and expert communities and stimulating the exchange of divergent views;
- Promotion and the democratisation of public debate on topics relevant to the Europeanisation of the Western Balkans – through the BiEPAG blog, which brings together policy makers, analysts and scholars to debate the most pressing issues in the region.

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