Democratization and the Role of Parliaments in the Western Balkans

Aspen Western Balkans Stakeholder Forum 2022

Berlin, June 21-24, 2022

Conference Report

Aspen Institute Germany

On June 21-24, 2022, the Aspen Institute Germany held a closed-door conference in Berlin, Germany titled "Democratization and the Role of Parliaments in the Western Balkans" as part of the "Aspen Western Balkans Stakeholder Forum 2022", which was generously supported by the German Federal Foreign Office. At an inflection point for the European integration of the Western Balkans, the conference aimed to analyze the progress of democratization in the region and to generate specific policy recommendations to address remaining challenges. With over 40 members of parliament, government officials, activists, and think tank leaders in attendance from Germany and the Western Balkans (WB) region (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), the conference brought together a diverse set of perspectives.

The conference sessions focused on topics including the rule of law, the role of parliaments, media freedom, political polarization, and the role of external actors in the Western Balkans. All sessions of this closed-door conference were conducted under Chatham House rules to enable candid and in-depth dialogue. Accordingly, this report is a non-attributed summary of the participants' perspectives on challenges to, and policy recommendations for, democratization in the Western Balkans. Aspen Germany does not take responsibility for the views expressed in this report.

Role of External Actors

The invasion of Ukraine has significantly-impacted geopolitics across Europe and particularly in the Western Balkans region. For decades, external actors have pursued their interests in the region and influenced national governments. However, the role of external actors is shifting and growing as authoritarian nations, such as Russia and China, increasingly come into conflict with democracies. This has significant implications for the regional role of the EU, as well as prospects for democratization, institution building, and EU accession processes in the region.[1]

Participants agreed that Russia posed a significant risk to democratization and stability, including through its willingness to manipulate unresolved ethnonationalist disputes to promote its interests. Concerns were expressed over Russia's strong influence in Serbia, its disruption of the Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) peace implementation council and its support for highly provocative Bosnian statements regarding the independence aspirations of Republika Srpska. Participants also warned that Russia may attempt to start a proxy conflict by capitalizing on lingering resentment over the presence of NATO troops in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). However, despite Russia's strong leverage over the energy sector, participants expressed doubt about how far Russian influence could reach given Russia's relatively limited trade and investment in the region. The group concurred that China had expanded its regional influence and that it increasingly aimed to use development financing to achieve political goals. In the participants' view, Chinese intervention financially strengthened the ruling elite and slowed EU/NATO integration by propping up corrupt systems. Concern was also expressed about the immense success of state-subsidized Chinese companies at securing government infrastructure contracts, including those funded by the EU.

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[1] Branislav Stanicek, Russia's Influence in the Western Balkans, in: European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), June 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/733523/ EPRS_ATA(2022)733523_ EN.pdf (accessed January 16, 2023).

Participants cautioned that private EU companies were failing to compete against Chinese subsidies and that public opinion was shifting toward China as it took credit for building EU-funded projects.

Participants reflected that China had cultivated an image of itself as a "benign, benevolent, and reliable" partner, while the EU was not paying sufficient attention nor taking necessary action to hone its own image. Despite nominal "EU information centers" in the Western Balkans, in the view of the participants, the EU's branding efforts in the region had been half-hearted and largely a failure.

Criticism was levied at the current EU approach to the Western Balkans: participants emphasized that EU support for autocrats in the interest of "stability" increased the difficulty of achieving democratic reforms and contradicted the efforts of journalists and civil society activists. The group also lamented that the EU rarely used its financial leverage to effectively exert pro-democracy influence. Some also argued that EU attempts to economically lure Serbia away from Russia were destined to fail because they ignored the strong emotional and cultural ties underlying the Serbia-Russia relationship: Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić recently claimed that 85 percent of Serbian citizens "will always side with Russia," and while he did not cite a specific study, the group agreed that this number is likely accurate.[2]

Participants agreed that the United States and the EU had demonstrated insufficient interest in the region and that the 2021 NATO Afghanistan withdrawal had increased concerns about the reliability of Western commitments. Many participants felt that attention had been diverted to Africa, and participants agreed that increased U.S. involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) was a rare exception to the trend of disengagement. Participants argued that a renewed focus on the Western Balkans should be part of the *Zeitenwende* and that full NATO membership offers should be extended to Kosovo, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) to counter Chinese and Russian influence.

It is important to note that while the consensus was as stated above, a few participants argued that Russia and China were not major obstacles to democratization or EU accession. In these participants' view, business monopolies and state capture by domestic actors were mostly responsible for hindering these processes.

EU Accession and Integration of the Western Balkans

Democratization has long been a non-negotiable condition for EU accession, yet reform in the Western Balkans has progressed slowly. As a result, EU accession has stalled, and new paradigms may be needed to promote European integration and democracy in the region. Conference participants engaged with multiple representatives from the German Federal Foreign Office to discuss challenges to the democratization and integration processes.

Participants argued that Russia's invasion of Ukraine highlighted the need for an accelerated integration process and its utility to the EU as a strategic tool. There was concern, however, that traditional EU enlargement in the Western Balkans may no longer be possible due to internal EU poli-

[2] TASS Russian News Agency, 85% of Serbians Will Always Support Russia Whatever May Happen – President Vucic, February 21, 2022, https://tass.com/world/1407763 (accessed January 16, 2023).

tics. Participants pointed to the strength of rightist parties in European national elections, the reluctance of the European Parliament to expand its size, and the reticence of French President Emmanuel Macron to advance the EU candidacy of Western Balkans states as prime examples.

Accordingly, it was emphasized that other forms of Europeanization, beyond formal EU accession, should be discussed. Rather than an all-or-nothing approach, some participants suggested a staged democratization-for-integration process, where countries gradually receive specific EU benefits in exchange for democratization steps. Such an approach would begin with providing increased financial support and allowing countries of the Western Balkans to participate in EU institutions as observers. There could also be discussion about giving the Western Balkans voting rights in the EU, but with limited veto power. Some participants argued that the EU should allow integration to move forward even if certain problems, such as corruption, persisted. There was relief that the "traffic light" coalition of the German government planned to continue the Berlin Process.

The group agreed that certain domestic actors posed obstacles to the accession process. Participants cautioned that many executives and parliamentarians wanted to manipulate EU accession processes for their own interests, often in coordination with a web of corrupt organized crime networks. It was noted that this problem would be difficult to resolve via existing bureaucratic processes. Participants expressed concern that the slow pace of EU integration would bolster separatists and nationalists in the Western Balkans. There

was a consensus that although home-grown reform was optimal, the EU enlargement process was the most powerful incentive available to inspire democratic transition and stability in the region.

The group also cautioned that slow accession progress was gradually souring public opinion of the EU in the region and fomenting Euroscepticism. Many participants expressed dismay that the EU had been shifting accession standards and making false promises. Others questioned the advancement of Serbia despite its plurality of citizens opposing EU accession.[3] It was lamented that the EU had not established empirical procedures for evaluating whether countries fulfilled the Copenhagen accession criteria.

There was also significant frustration among the group over "double standards" in the accession process. Participants criticized the advancement of an undemocratic Russophilic Serbia, as well as Ukraine's fast-track receipt of EU candidate status despite its failure to meet the pre-accession anticorruption benchmarks to which Western Balkan countries had been held. Some warned that if EU accession processes were accelerated for countries (such as Ukraine) at war with EU foes, this could provide a perverse incentive for Western Balkans leaders to rabble-rouse and create conflict, perhaps involving Russia, in order to put their countries higher on the EU enlargement agenda.

It was noted that emotions often ran high in the Western Balkans around EU enlargement because while the EU saw accession as a political process, many in the Western Balkans viewed enlargement as

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[3] Katy Dartford, For First Time, a Majority of Serbs are Against Joining the EU – Poll, in: EuroNews, April 22, 2022, https://www.euronews.com/2022/04/22/for-first-time-a-majority-of-serbs-are-against-joining-the-eu- poll (accessed January 16, 2023).

an "identity process," with the slow pace of accession reflecting EU perceptions of the value of Western Balkan peoples' culture/identity and of the legitimacy of their status as "true Europeans." Participants observed that many citizens of Kosovo, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) wondered whether their Muslim identity had contributed to the EU's reluctance to accept them, especially as the EU moved closer to Serbia, which had a Christian majority.

To respond to the challenges discussed, the group urged specific steps: first, admitting Western Balkan countries to the Council of Europe to support institutional development; second, creating more specific and reliable roadmaps for the accession process in order to build trust; third, expanding the accession process from a government-to-government format to a people-to-people format including civil society and youth; and fourth, implementing a staged democratization-for-integration process as discussed earlier.

Participants agreed that there was shared responsibility between the EU and the Western Balkans for moving the accession process forward: the Western Balkans had to continue delivering on reform, and the EU had to tangibly advance accession to demonstrate that it genuinely intended to integrate the Western Balkans countries.

Political Polarization

Political polarization has deep roots in the Western Balkans, and party politics in the region have long been characterized by stalemate, sidelining of opposition parties, and a lack of constructive parliamentary dialogue. As a result, polarization significantly hinders the effective functioning of parliaments and government institutions. The group discussed current challenges and strategies to contain and address the worsening trend of political polarization in the region.

Participants agreed that the region's political polarization had diverse causes. The group highlighted underdeveloped institutions and high barriers to political entry, driven partially by corruption, as major sources of polarization. In the group's view, high barriers to entry prevented moderate parties from gaining a foothold and encourage established parties to move to extremes to motivate their constituents. There was also a consensus that social media hate speech and the creation of online echo chambers have worsened polarization.

Participants also emphasized that the polarization problem was so acute that polarization was the defining trademark of some political parties: they existed solely to denigrate the opposition and have no interest in reducing polarization, as this would spell their demise. Additionally, it was noted that the Western Balkans political culture had long been characterized by intense populism, which encouraged crisis and conflict, rather than constructive dialogue and dealmaking. Participants also lamented the inability of parliamentarians to criticize their party leaders because of top-down party structures which effectively forbid intraparty dissent.

The dynamic between opposition and ruling parties was also criticized. The group agreed that the current political environment encouraged marginalizing established opponents and reflexively rejecting

policy proposals from opposition parties. In addition, the group discussed the tendency of opposition parties to protest by boycotting parliamentary proceedings. There was a consensus that while such boycotts may slow down proceedings and motivate voters, they were ineffective at stopping policies from becoming law. The group agreed that parliamentary boycotts were a poor long-term strategy because they removed incentives for executives and majority parties to negotiate with opposition leaders.

There was a consensus that in order to reduce polarization, high-quality dialogue between ruling and opposition parties was needed. It was also agreed that the community of parliamentarians, political staffers, and think tank experts was underdeveloped and required capacity building. Moreover, it was highlighted that unless corruption was tackled, polarization would remain a problem.

The group recommended the following steps: first, establish open list voting for parliamentary elections (as Albania has successfully done); second, reduce political barriers to entry for new political parties and candidates; third, include citizens in the policy-making process via petitions and surveys; and fourth, encourage engagement between young parliamentarians and civil society to create a culture of dialogue among rising leaders.

Role of Parliaments

Parliaments are essential to democracy: they serve as a check on the executive and as an avenue for effective representation of diverse societal stakeholders. However, in the Western Balkans, there are significant

challenges to these ideals. In the region, parliaments often lack clear norms, executives act unilaterally, and opposition lawmakers are sidelined. Participants discussed these challenges, as well as strategies for increasing the parliamentary role in EU accession and reform processes. The conference featured extensive time with German parliamentarians, including a keynote dinner and a meeting at the Bundestag.

Participants lamented that in the Western Balkans, parliaments had little influence over the power of the purse or oversight of decision-making of the executive branch. There was a consensus that this problem had been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led parliaments to shift fiscal powers to the executive branch to address the public health emergency. Participants agreed that parliamentarians were afraid to confront the executive branch to demand the return of these powers.

Participants discussed the special role of parliaments in maintaining the rule of law and the importance of exchanging views with parliamentarians from other parties. In addition, conference participants acknowledged the importance of addressing extremist parties in a united fashion. The participants also discussed plummeting trust in political institutions and novel strategies for engaging citizens in the work of parliaments.

There was a consensus that parliaments needed to be better included and more closely consulted in reform processes, and participants noted that parliamentary and decision-making processes needed to be

better connected to citizens and their interests.

The group agreed that new initiatives were needed to encourage young people to run for parliament and to foster exchange between young parliamentarians in the Western Balkans. It was also recommended that parliaments created and strengthened their codes of conduct to ensure orderly functioning and minimize disruptive behavior.

Additionally, participants called for establishing a parliamentary dimension of the Berlin process and creating new dialogue platforms among Western Balkans parliamentarians, civil society organizations, and EU officials to discuss reform and integration processes. It was also suggested that the Council of Europe could be an effective platform for interparliamentary exchange of best practices between the Western Balkans and EU states.

On a broader level, the group called for a transition away from the prevailing semi-presidential system to full parliamentary systems in the region. Participants argued that the semi-presidential system had hindered democratization by allowing the executive branch to consolidate power and sideline parliaments.

Rule of Law and Corruption

Corruption is a major problem in the Western Balkans, and corrupt politicians, as well as organized criminal networks, pose serious risks to the rule of law. Participants discussed the challenges inherent in combating corruption and strengthening the rule of law in the region.

The group concurred that current practices in the Western Balkans, such as the executive branch commanding judges, employers threatening termination of contracts based on voing choices, and university admission occurring based on party affiliation, constitute egregious violations of the rule of law. It was also established that political elites frequently engaged in bribery, intentionally undermined government institutions, and flirted with organized crime, making it extremely difficult to advance reform or remove corrupt politicians from party lists. It was noted that European entrepreneurs were reluctant to invest in the Western Balkans because of these issues.

It was stated that the post-Yugoslav jobs-for-political-loyalty social contract was still much stronger than the EU-accession-for-democratization contract, and participants agreed that reform was direly needed to strengthen the rule of law. Many political elites quietly acted to prevent EU accession because European integration threatened their corruptly amassed wealth. However, it was emphasized that in the interest of fairness and avoiding hypocrisy, rule of law standards applied to the Western Balkans in the accession process had to be no stricter than those applied to current EU member states, such as Hungary.

The group also acknowledged a frequent dangerous tendency among politicians to delegitimize elections. Ironically, it was noted that in some, but not all, cases, electoral delegitimization had backfired on the "delegitimizers" when their supporters lose faith in the electoral system and decide not to vote.

In the participants' view, most of the corruption problems discussed lie not with the law itself, but rather with its implementation. Thus, the group agreed that strengthening institutions, increasing enforcement, and building norms were the necessary first steps to address corruption and strengthen the rule of law.

Media Freedom and Challenges

A free and robust media landscape is essential for democratization and reform. However, the Western Balkans region faces serious challenges to media freedom including political interference, opaque and variable media funding, a lack of diverse and independent media outlets, and political interference. Hate speech and disinformation are also significant problems. The participants discussed these issues in depth and exchanged perspectives with German media regulators.

Participants noted that domestic-driven disinformation was now a greater problem than foreign-driven disinformation. For instance, some citizens of Western Balkans countries believed, incorrectly, that their countries were already part of the EU because of misleading and outright false statements made by political leaders and amplified by media outlets. The group also discussed a worrying trend of government-influenced media outlets intentionally mistranslating content for ethnolinguistic minorities in order to spread pro-government messages in these communities. In addition, it was noted that social media was playing an ever-increasing role in the spread of "fake news," hate speech, and other disinformation. Media-based incitement was also discussed as a major problem: it was reported that in Serbia, media

outlets engaged in constant warmongering and fearmongering against Bosniaks, Croats, and the West. Media tabloidization and polarization were also discussed as significant related problems.

The group attributed the financial unviability of independent media outlets to the following factors: small markets constrained by language barriers; lucrative state funding funneled by the government to supportive outlets; improperly functioning or non-existent media regulatory institutions; rampant disinformation; and dangerous working conditions for journalists. It was also noted that advertisers were part of the problem as they were influenced by the government, exhibited reluctance to advertise with independent media, and held significant financial leverage over media outlets.

Participants agreed that it was difficult to attract qualified, honest, and independent journalists because field journalists generally received salaries far below the national average, even as pro-government prime time personalities received robust government-funded wages.[4] These government-funded wages acted as a form of significant financial leverage for those in power. There were also multiple unsolved murders of independent journalists as well as ongoing significant threats to their safety.

Participants explained that it was much easier to address organized crime and corruption than media freedom because there was much greater understanding of the organized crime problem among citizens and civil society. It was expressed that in the Western Balkans, there was deep dis-

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[4] FENA, Salaries in Bosnia's Media Sector Below Country's Average, a Research Shows, in: N1 News, December 28, 2020, https://ba.n1info.com/english/news/salaries-in-bosnias-media-sector-below-countrys-average-a-research-shows/ (accessed January 16, 2023).

trust of journalists, who were often viewed by citizens as "enemies of the people" involved with organized crime and political corruption. It was stated that parliamentarians conducted smear campaigns against the few independent media outlets and civil society organizations that do exist, and it was reported that frivolous court cases were often brought against media outlets.

The group bemoaned inadequate connections and solidarity among independent journalists across the Western Balkans which made collaboratively addressing government influence and presenting stories from a regional (rather than national) perspective difficult. Participants also noted that NGOs and others were often shy about tackling the media issue because they needed media coverage of their work and did not want to antagonize local media outlets.

Participants agreed that television was still the most powerful media in the Western Balkans. It was stated that this had created a concentration of influence and that state media providers, on social media and TV, were the most influential source of news throughout the region. In Montenegro for example, all five major TV news channels were controlled by or aligned with Serbian interests. It was noted, as well, that TV and other traditional media serve as propaganda tools for the executive branch, ruling parties, and other powerful groups. For instance, a study found that Serbian President Vučić appeared 147 times more frequently than the most covered opposition politician in Serbian media.[5]

Media regulators in the Western Balkans were also seen as weak: it was reported that in Montenegro, for example, media regulators refused to establish a regulatory commission for fear of being removed by the government. Media outlets, for their part, also refused to create self-policed bodies for self-regulation and fear that any increased government regulation would be used against them, according to the group.

Although media freedom directly affected EU accession (Chapter 23), the group expressed pessimism that the enlargement process could effectively serve as an incentive to improve the media freedom landscape when multiple EU countries, such as Slovakia, Malta, and Hungary, struggled with media freedom problems similar to those in the Western Balkans. In addition, the group criticized the EU for dispensing undue praise of Serbia's media freedom: in 2021, the European Commission noted appreciatively Serbia's "limited progress" on media freedom, despite the fact that Serbia had severely hampered a working group to protect journalists, among other poor practices.[6][7] Participants lamented how the Serbian government had waved this "undeserved" recognition like a "gold star," and urged the EU to be more judicious with its praise and more critical in its reporting.

Conference participants discussed multiple strategies for strengthening media independence, fairness, and accountability across the region. The participants encouraged the European Commission to publish reports (biannual or annual) on the state of media freedom in the Western Balkans. They also urged the establishment of a panel of senior experts to analyze the current media landscape in the Western Balkans and to make formal recommenda-

[5] Nikola Burazer, et al., Serbian Election 2020: Erosion of Trust in the Democratic Process, in: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, August 2020, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/11-Serbian-Election-2020.pdf (accessed January 16, 2023).
[6] European Commission, Key Findings of the 2021 Report on Serbia, October 19, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_21_5281 (accessed January 16, 2023).

tions for improvement. Additionally, the group called for the EU to pressure Western Balkans governments to implement restrictions on media ownership monopolies and to strengthen the capacity and independence of media regulatory bodies. Participants also recommended establishing government-funded public media supervised by a truly independent entity to avoid government coercion and increase the availability of free and fair information. Finally, the group emphasized the need for stronger ties and solidarity among independent media and journalists across the Western Balkans. This could occur through exchange initiatives and conferences focused on media freedom.

Conclusion

At a consequential moment for the future of the Western Balkans, the "Aspen Western Balkans Stakeholder Forum 2022: Democratization and the Role of Parliaments in the Western Balkans" provided an essential opportunity for dialogue on prospects for democratization and European integration of the region. The participants engaged in meaningful discussion and provided concrete recommendations for improving the rule of law, strengthening parliaments, minimizing corruption, and protecting media freedom in the Western Balkans. The consensus centered around taking tangible, incremental steps toward European integration; deepening European and U.S. engagement in the region; bolstering civil society and parliamentary exchanges; and reinvigorating faith in democracy and media among ordinary citizens. As the EU reevaluates its security architecture and neighborhood policy in response to Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, Aspen Germany looks forward to contin-

ued engagement with the Western Balkans region. Aspen Germany sincerely hopes that the policy ideas discussed at this conference will contribute to forward-looking action and to the strengthening of freedom, democracy, and economic prosperity throughout the region.

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[7] European Western Balkans, Serbian Media Associations Leave Government's Working Group for the Safety of Journalists in Protest, in: Centre for Contemporary Politics, March 17, 2021, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/03/17/serbian-media-associations-leave-governments-working-group-for-the-safety-of-journalists-in-protest/ (accessed January 16, 2023).

About the author

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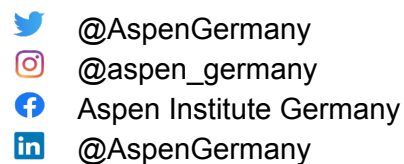
The conference was convened under Chatham House rules. The summary represents a collection of the points raised by the participants. It does not necessarily reflect the position of the author or the Aspen Institute Germany.

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