



# Western Balkans Working Group

Berlin, November 23-24, 2022

Conference  
Report 

Aspen Institute  Germany



On November 23-24, 2022, the Aspen Institute Germany concluded its Western Balkans Program 2022 with the Western Balkans Working Group in Berlin, Germany. Funded by the Federal Foreign Office, the meeting was designed as an informal gathering to allow for a free exchange of ideas and brought together key thought leaders from Germany and the Western Balkan (WB) region (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia). The goal of the working group was to develop concrete policy recommendations for the key issues at hand. The topics discussed included the future of the Berlin Process, democratization and the role of parliaments, implementing the Green Agenda, and the current state of the EU enlargement process. Main findings of the discussion were then recapped in a public panel examining the EU's geopolitical strategic position and how it relates to the WB integration process into the European Union (EU).

The Working Group was held under the Chatham House Rule to allow for in-depth and frank discussion. The conference closed with a public panel. The following report offers a summary of the topics discussed, views shared, challenges identified, and policies suggested. The Aspen Institute Germany does not take responsibility for the views expressed in this report.

### **The Future of the Berlin Process**

The Working Group opened on November 24 with a kickoff session discussing the future of the Berlin Process. The discussion was joined by a representative of the Federal Foreign Office and sought to look back at the most recent Berlin Process summit as well as forward to the future of the Berlin

Process and how its momentum might be secured.

Amidst mounting frustration over the drawn-out EU accession talks, the Berlin Process was largely seen as a useful catalyst for talks and regional cooperation. Overall, there was wide appreciation expressed for the fresh interest in the WB region and the revival of the Berlin Process. However, while welcoming this positive turn, many participants lamented its years of inactivity, which appeared to have been harmful to the accession process. Some participants criticized that the Berlin Process itself was a sign of decade-long failure to generate sufficient political will for EU enlargement.

Nevertheless, the most recent summit of the Berlin Process was largely seen as a success. The Working Group participants welcomed the breakthrough in the negotiations of three new Common Regional Market agreements, which concerned ID travel within the region, recognition of academic qualifications, and recognition of qualifications for certain professions. These agreements were expected to facilitate freedom of movement and employment across the region. Participants also lauded the Declaration on Energy Security Cooperation, in which the leaders of the Western Balkans committed to intensifying their effort to implement the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans aligned with the EU's Green Deal.

Now that the Process was re-activated, it was hoped that more concrete results, such as agreements regarding data roaming and shared payment systems, would soon follow. There was also hope that the common



market could be expanded, that issues currently blocked by Serbia would be resolved, that the initiative to inject the status of excellency into WB universities was resumed, and that the Green Agenda was driven forward more energetically.

The revival of the Berlin Process was also seen by many as a positive signal from Berlin that the Western Balkans had not been forgotten amidst the war in Ukraine. However, while it was understandable that the atrocities in Ukraine were diverting attention, political will, and resources, the WB region required more political engagement from and higher visibility within the EU to uphold its newly found momentum in the Berlin Process.

In line with this, it was considered a positive step that the next summit of the Berlin Process would take place in Tirana, Albania, underscoring ownership in the region and a further demonstration of WB states' willingness and ability to coordinate efforts.

Looking forward, there was still the need for sustainable rule of law reforms for EU integration to make substantial progress. More work was also needed on the Green Agenda, democratization, and the combatting of crime and corruption. Some argued, however, that these reforms were not viable without the EU actively signaling its continued willingness for enlargement.

Finally, there remained a number of concerning issues to tackle: Russia's war on Ukraine had made clear that the energy transition was a security concern. Also, Kosovo and Serbia required further work to normalize ties and help improve regional

cooperation. North Macedonia's and Montenegro's difficulties with constitutional reform were acknowledged as another hurdle to regional integration, with consensus lacking on how best to tackle this. While some emphasized reforms targeting rule of law, others called on the EU to assume a more pro-active mediating role.

In future summits, it was recommended that the Berlin Process addressed resilience in energy dependency, fostering investment in the Green Agenda, and providing support for the green transition. Further attention was to be placed on reform for the rule of law, reforms combatting corruption and organized crime, and reforms fostering education. Structurally, the Berlin Process was to focus more intently on implementation and the incorporation of parliaments.

## **Democratization and the Role of Parliaments**

The following discussion focused on the role of national parliaments in the Western Balkans, with an eye both on EU enlargements and the role they should play in the Berlin Process. A member of the Federal Foreign Office took part in the talks as participants deliberated how national parliaments, oppositional forces, and civil society could be strengthened in order to bolster democratization and the rule of law in the Western Balkans.

Some Working Group participants pointed out that the biggest problem parliaments faced in the Western Balkans was a lack of independence. Along the process of democratization, it was criticized that parliaments in WB nations were more a 'voting machine' for ruling powers rather than a



discussion forum for legislation. Politically, party leaders exerted such influence on members of parliament (MPs) that these became reluctant to question party lines. To counter this, rigorous candidate election systems needed to be introduced.

Other Working Group participants criticized that the parliaments of the Western Balkan countries still had a long way to go to become effective in not only debating and adopting legislation but also organizing effective oversight of the implementation of legislation. Thus, their oversight was often limited to budget oversight – and in some cases this did not even work effectively when it came to debt accumulation. Post legislative scrutiny needed to be strengthened.

The Working Group participants also discussed areas in which the parliaments needed to play a much bigger role. Two topics highlighted were the energy transition and climate change which, so far, played a subordinate role in the day-to-day work of MPs. This needed to change, and awareness needed to be increased in order to ensure a more effective implementation of the Green Agenda.

To allow parliaments to play a more effective role, Working Group participants agreed that capacities needed to be built but that also a cultural change was required. The Working Group participants pointed out that the most appropriate mechanisms to do so still had to be found. Cross-party parliamentary caucuses had shown positive results, however, opposition remained under pressure in systems where “faith” in the party leader was more important than critical debate. To turn this

around, opposition needed to be strengthened and improvements had to be initiated at a local level. In addition, the European party family would do well to utilize its leverage to strengthen opposition by offering them a platform for visibility and credibility.

Another challenge the opposition faced was frustration and resignation among voters. Media pluralism was suggested as indispensable to counter this, as it acquainted the public with an array of new ideas, making media a cornerstone of democracy.

Strategic communication with the public to raise visibility was also crucial. The format of “Citizen Dialogues” (Bürgerdialoge) was discussed as interesting tool in this regard. Similar formats had already proven successful in other countries and could help overcome alienation between citizens and politicians.

Some speakers drew attention to the political crises in Montenegro, arguing that the EU should assume a proactive role in mediating the conflict. One speaker concluded that this was an example for strong parliaments not necessarily being a boon for democracies, as they also wielded the power to block important change. To prevent this, parliaments required legitimacy and transparency that was enforced along the entire administration.

Lastly, the Working Group participants also addressed the role national parliamentarians could play in the Berlin Process. Some participants pointed out that opportunities had been missed to create awareness among MPs of the relevance of the





Berlin Process, which in turn had undercut local ownership. Rather, MPs needed further involvement in EU considerations and the Berlin Process to ensure transparency in the dispersal of funds provided and legitimacy for reforms undertaken. This would avoid the appearance of “outsourcing” the ratification of decisions made without the consideration of constituents’ needs and interests.

This had to be done in a way that kept the capacities and potential impact of individual MPs in consideration. Working with youth was expected to produce the best results in this line, as the younger generation was set to inherit the future whereas older generations still harbored residual resentment from past wars. Also, more female MPs were required, as were more female contributors along the entire Berlin Process format.

### **Implementing the Green Agenda**

At the center of this session stood the challenges which are slowing down the implementation of the “Green Agenda” and how they could be overcome. Signed in 2020, the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans is a roadmap for the region to adapt its energy policies to the European Green Deal. It runs along five core areas: climate, energy and mobility; circular economy; pollution prevention; sustainable agriculture and food production; and biodiversity. A German MP and member of the Green party joined the discussion as a special guest to offer impulses for the Working Group discussions.

At present, the overall consensus was that the Western Balkans were failing at climate protection, despite apparent efforts that

gave rise to hope that the situation would improve over time. Sentiments towards WB governments’ success in ensuring energy security were more pessimistic, with outlooks expecting energy security to worsen in the future. Opinions on how well biodiversity was being protected in WB countries varied starkly, with some participants believing biodiversity was being protected very well, and others grading efforts to this end quite poorly.

The overwhelming pessimism over the Western Balkans’ handling of the climate crisis, energy security, and biodiversity was in part explained by the fact that civil society found itself overwhelmed with the question of where to begin tackling these challenges. Resistance to a green transition came from ill-equipped political decision-makers, industrial stakeholders, as well as the wider public.

Thus, there was wide consensus that vested interests in high-pollutant industries as well as lacking awareness and capacities among decision-makers were major hurdles to driving a green transition forward. These were most effectively addressed at a local – rather than national – level. This was an urgent matter, considering that non-action would continue trading in short-term energy security through coal for long-term environmental and health concerns.

On a civic level, the most pressing concerns voiced were the perceived social, economic and financial costs of a green transition, with fears that rising energy prices would widen social inequality. This worry frequently overshadowed the long-term incentives for a green transition,



namely the reduction of pollution, mitigation of the climate crisis, addressing the health crisis, and securing future economic development and competitiveness. Microloans and credits were useful tools to counter this initial resistance, not least because they also provided financial incentives to decentralize energy production and thereby liberalize the highly regulated energy market.

Experience in Germany showed that a decentralized grid was an effective approach to securing reliable energy through private initiatives. Cooperatives had proven useful formats for creating capacities locally. However, transitioning from centralized grids required overcoming a number of bureaucratic hurdles to ensure stable production. Furthermore, positive messaging – namely that this would help put money in people's pockets – could help overcome such hurdles and bolster private initiatives.

Beyond financial concerns, Working Group participants pointed out that the public also appeared ambivalent toward green technologies for fear that their implementation in the immediate vicinity of the public would reduce the quality of living in that area. To counter this and garner wider public support for the Green Agenda, MPs would need to address all the minute concerns and conflicts that constituents voiced with green technologies. Doing so would allow for discussions to unfold that were able to bring all interests into consideration, in order to find a tailored compromise ideal for the region in question. Landfills in the Western Balkans were pointed out as an example of unpopular public measures whose mishandling cost the government

opportunities to tap into resources that would further the Green Agenda.

Citizens' resistance within the Western Balkans to a green transition could further be met with education campaigns targeting young generations – ideally starting as early as elementary school. The media also played a role in this with its mandate to educate the public. Currently, it was criticized that the media showed little expertise in the subject of climate change, which meant that in-depth discussions of these issues were lacking. Some also believed that talent was lacking in the energy sector and in the ministries, with corrupt practices being perpetuated by those who were unwilling to identify and report inefficiencies, while opportunities for a sustainable green transition remained overlooked.

There was some pushback regarding the claim that expertise in the region was lacking, with others positing that expertise was present, but underutilized. In order to bring this resource to the forefront, regional collaboration was needed to strengthen the visibility of experts and provide them opportunities to exchange support in accessing local governments as well as the EU.

Finally, there was a perceived contradiction between securing reliable energy and transitioning towards green energy. However, instead of leaving the WB to develop an answer to this dichotomy on its own, the question needed to be jointly addressed from a Europe-wide perspective. It was emphasized that this transition was urgent, given that climate change had already es-



calated to a crisis in some regions, and that it required international support to shift “from words to deeds.”

Regarding energy security, one participant added that the war in Ukraine had made clear that future energy security was impossible without diversification. In order to stay on track with diversifying, political will had to be fortified, uncompromising (“we don’t have enough time for ‘buts’”), transparent, and financially as well as structurally supported by the EU.

Proposals for providing EU funding for the WB’s green transition that could be both meaningful and un-bureaucratic were twofold. For one, it was suggested to integrate WB economies into the EU integral market, where the Emission Trading System (EU ETS) could provide funds for a green transition and a shared market for energy security. Another proposal was that of an EU-wide Green Agenda Fund, which would help finance the energy transition in the Western Balkans, with the Berlin Process serving as a potential conduit for said fund.

However, not all Working Group participants were convinced by these proposals. Critical voices pointed out the concern that such funds were not always beneficial to local populations, but instead often dissipated into corrupt channels that showed little environmental regard. To counter this, local absorption capacities and corruption practices had to be taken into consideration when dispersing funds for a green transition. Also, administrative capacities needed expanding in order to effectively apply for the grants available. Additional reservations regarding EU funds pointed to

the already vast potential for investment present that was locked behind stringent regulations and high lignite subsidies. Instead of increasing external financing, it was argued, there was a great need to liberalize and integrate the regional energy market.

In order to liberalize markets, subsidies had to be cleared to allow for a genuine balance between energy security, affordable pricing, and environmental protection. In addition, it was put forth that the integration of markets was crucial, as was the horizontal tackling of corruption. There was disagreement, however, whether the WB energy market should be integrated before incorporation into the EU market or as a part of integration in the EU market.

There was also some disagreement over whether a Europe-wide solution to energy security was beneficial to the Western Balkans. Some warned that sharing energy sourced from renewables in the Western Balkans across the European market would be to the detriment of producing nations, as the bulk of their energy could become subject to export instead of domestic use.

There was wide agreement that climate and environment were issues of good governance and should be treated as such. In line with this, it was also necessary to open talks about disaster management and regional crisis management across Schengen borders. This proposal was well-received, with other participants adding that once such cross-border assistance was in place, it would certainly be put to use. However, neither the physical limitations of power



grids, nor the potential for corruption in a sector as sensitive as energy, could be overlooked.

The final question was how policies could encourage energy efficiency in consumer behavior and in construction. In both cases, fiscal incentives seemed most useful, in the form of subsidy schemes as well as positive communication to grab attention and increase acceptance.

### **The Current State of the EU Enlargement Process**

In the final session of the Working Group, participants looked at current political shifts in the Western Balkan neighborhood and how this tied in to the dynamic of the EU enlargement process. Particular focus was placed on rule of law reforms, the impact of Russia's war against Ukraine, and disputes among Western Balkan neighbors. A special guest from the Federal Government specializing in the Western Balkans was present to offer insights regarding Germany's position in the matters at hand. The Working Groups was followed by a public panel discussion deliberating whether the EU was experiencing a geopolitical awakening and how this might give new impetus to the integration process of the Western Balkans.

There was wide agreement on the core issues believed to be slowing WB accession to the EU. These included: insufficient rule-of-law reforms; poor strategic communication; the dearth of clear roadmaps and guidelines as well as of palpable results; insufficient interest for and understanding of the WB region; insufficient political will and a lack of focus; and waning EU credibility. Regarding the EU's possi-

ble geopolitical awakening, opinions were not as uniform, with some expressing optimism that Ukraine joining the EU would send positive signals of a unified continent, and others warning of the EU's poor image as it grappled with internal strife and increasingly undemocratic members.

Examining the effects of Russia's war in Ukraine on the EU enlargement process more closely, one speaker argued that the decision to grant Ukraine EU candidacy status was beneficial to the EU given Ukraine's strong civil society, and beneficial to WB states as it pressured the EU to deliver on WB accession promises. While the decision had been in part a political one, catalyzed by sympathy for a nation under attack, it was argued that the EU's eagerness to integrate Ukraine's strong civil society was a sign that the EU was "evolving" past using enlargement promises as an instrument for leverage.

While all Working Group participants strongly underlined their solidarity with Ukraine, some doubted the fairness of rushing accession talks for Ukraine despite the considerable delay several WB countries hopeful for candidacy had experienced. Others questioned the merit of making political rather than technocratic decisions for EU accession. This called into question whether the EU was truly acting (geo)strategically.

Thus, in light of the EU remaining largely unresponsive to WB reforms, the public was increasingly adopting the view that arguments delaying the EU accession process for technical reasons were covering up political unwillingness. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it was feared that a fur-



ther delay of an EU candidate status would become harmful, as it could shift disappointed civic attitudes towards Euroscepticism and make societies resistant to further reform. The EU and EU member states had to assume a more active role in communication to bring citizens back on board. Many agreed that Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with others, needed to receive candidate status in order to drive the WB integration process ahead and maintain public enthusiasm.

It was argued, the EU's decision-making process regarding enlargement was, unfortunately, currently flawed. On the one hand, it appeared the EU had lost its passion to unify Europe, which led to lackluster communication and insufficient signals of support by the EU. This, in turn, dampened the motivation of candidate states to carry forward reforms and eventually even led to "EU-fatigue." To counter this, politicians in WB countries, as well as EU politicians, both had to advance their strategic communication to explain the benefits of reforms that WB citizens considered painful. EU member states also needed to be mindful of their overall communication. Prejudice was still being heard, even if Germany saw predominantly positive ties to the WB diaspora in Germany as well as the Western Balkans countries. The anxiety of Western Balkan states of "being stuck in a waiting room" could be reduced with concrete actions and solidarity from the EU, ranging from wide gestures such as phasing in a common market, to small steps such as enabling data roaming and addressing SEPA payment systems.

On the other hand, it was criticized that the EU's decision-making process regarding

enlargement was flawed by being too political and not technical, i.e. merit-based, enough. While a certain level of politicizing such processes could be beneficial, as it allowed for the exploitation of surges of public and political goodwill for momentum, the process of EU integration of the Western Balkans had become too politicized, which had proved detrimental.

As a result, the EU's lack of a strategy towards the Western Balkans had led to a mutual blame game of missed opportunities and failed policies. From a geostrategic perspective, this was a harmful image for the EU if it wished to compete alongside China, Russia, and the United States in the region. When it came to future plans, it was therefore important for the EU to "walk the talk," and provide a clear roadmap for EU integration without moving targets. A list of clear deliverables appeared useful to show determination and commitment to the process on the one hand, and expose those individuals who were exploiting EU inertia on the other.

Incorporating civil society into monitoring these deliverables could further help shift blame from the EU as a whole to individual politicians dragging out reforms. Mutual deadline commitments could help restore trust and determination. The transformative power of EU enlargement was not to be underestimated, and a successful integration of the WB was crucial for the EU to be able to portray itself as a credible global actor.

On this note, while mindful of the need in the Western Balkans to drive forward democratization in order to integrate into the EU, several speakers voiced their consternation





nation over the EU's internal strife and argued that the EU currently did not seem capable of enforcing democratic rule among its own members.

It was also acknowledged that geopolitical shifts in the region were disrupting the integration process. Increased concern was particularly expressed over Serbia and its position toward Russia. Apprehensions were voiced about Serbia's stance toward Russia on the one hand, and the "EU family" on the other.

However, instead of focusing too strongly on individual countries and nationalist ideologies, the EU and WB needed to adopt a more collective view and foster strong democracies. Key leaders should see themselves as democrats, not as nationalists, it was posited, as nationalism undermined the solidarity upon which the EU was built.

The Open Balkan initiative could add positive value by demonstrating WB commitment. Not all panelists shared enthusiasm for the Open Balkan initiative, however, as some believed it showed too much overlap with the Berlin Process. Nevertheless, whatever format could secure regional cohesion and allow for the unbureaucratic exchange of goods and services across borders was welcome.

Closing thoughts turned to diplomatic tensions between WB countries and the need for the region to deal with its mutually painful past. Disputes between Serbia and Kosovo were particularly salient in this context. When asked how countries dealt with their past, Working Group participants responded that dialogue was key to avoiding current misunderstandings based

in past wrongs. In this context, economic exchange and cooperation could help improve diplomatic ties. Looking forward, it was crucial for the WB region to avoid appeasing autocracies, but to firmly align with democratic values in a way that went beyond symbolism and incorporated free media. With Russia's war in Ukraine threatening energy security and a harsh winter expected to lie ahead, solidarity among democracies was all the more important.

There was wide agreement that the war on Ukraine had demonstrated the need for solidarity in the region. However, while the war had created a delicate situation, in which escalation had to be carefully avoided, it also posed an opportunity to create a more strategic approach in the region. The EU faced a large task in preparing to integrate the population of the WB; this required careful preparation. It was confirmed that one of the top foreign policy priorities of Germany's new government was EU enlargement.













## About the author

Maren Sass is a producer, editor and writer for the German media outlet Deutsche Welle. Maren holds an integrated master's degree in Political Science, Political Philosophy and Social Psychology from the LMU Munich. She speaks German and English fluently and Spanish at an intermediate level.

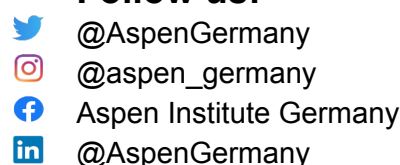
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Project Management: Dr. Stormy-Annika Mildner, Tina Bories

Author: Maren Sass

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