



# The importance of regional EU member states in the Berlin Process: The guided integration of the Western Balkans

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## Abstract

The Berlin Process offers the most significant and institutionalised roadmap for the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU. The direct involvement of EU institutions and member states, especially Germany and France, in the Process has transformed it into a trustworthy path to integration. The countries of the Western Balkans are still facing many difficulties and need to undertake serious reforms, especially in the fields of the fight against corruption and enforcing the rule of law. In this regard, the involvement of Croatia, Slovenia, Czechia, Poland and Austria in the Process should act as a catalyst for reform. The aforementioned states will become an important obstacle to increased Russian interference in the region as they have a clear mandate from the main driving forces of the EU, namely Germany, France and the Brussels-based EU institutions.

## Keywords

Western Balkans, EU integration, Regional cooperation, Berlin Process

## Introduction

The Berlin Process is a form of regional high-level cooperation among the Western Balkans on their path towards EU integration. It is an intergovernmental platform which was established in 2014 between the Western Balkan Six and their peers in the Berlin Process host countries. The Process also involves the EU institutions, international financial institutions, and the region's civil society, youth and businesses.

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The Process guarantees the full participation of each of the states in the region, with equal representation and rights on the path to accession negotiations. It also guarantees that contributions are based on merit, wherein the projects that benefit are a result of the effectiveness and the vision of each governing actor.

The Berlin Process is a political project, albeit one founded on economic cooperation. It is of concern to other actors (i.e. Russia and China), which seek to delay the integration of the region or to deepen disputes to the point that no comprehensive solution can be found. Russia is the political actor most fully invested in the failure of the Berlin Process, and it has called for coordinated counteraction of the Western alliance.

This article takes into account the importance of integration, which needs to remain at the core of any healthy regional cooperation. The recommitment to the Berlin Process marks a new milestone that encourages enthusiasm about the path to European integration for the Western Balkan region, and clearly and unequivocally confirms that the region is unchanged in desiring this future. The article analyses the impact on the Process of the neighbouring EU member states of Czechia, Slovenia, Croatia, Poland and Austria. Each has its own significance and position with regard to the assistance it can give to the Western Balkan countries on their road to integration.

New geopolitical developments, such as the war in Ukraine, the economic crisis and the stagnation of the integration process, mean that a renewed political commitment is required from all the states of the Western Balkan region. This political commitment is needed to fulfil the European integration agenda that has always been the focus of attention of Germany, France and the EU institutions, which also work in synchronicity with external elements such as the US and the UK.

## **The Brdo–Brijuni Process**

The annual summit that takes place as part of the Brdo–Brijuni Process enables a yearly meeting of the heads of state and government of the states of the Balkan region at which each is equally represented. The summit was created as a joint Ljubljana–Zagreb initiative to encourage dialogue, mutual trust and regional cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans and to encourage fulfilment of the steps of the European integration process (European Council 2021). The summit of 2021 was held at a time when European enthusiasm for enlargement was lacking and scepticism was filling the spaces of thought and action in the political establishment of Brussels, too. Despite this, the initiative has remained stable over time, has been fully accepted politically by each country and continues to be inclusive in nature, despite the changing political reality (European Council 2021).

The six-point platform is an important call to the Union from two members of the European political family, namely Slovenia and Croatia, which positively reflects on the commitments expressed, the initiatives undertaken, and the will continuously affirmed

by the EU. Such political will is important, but it remains only partially fulfilled in the absence of actions that can and should exceed it.

The new geopolitical developments stemming from the conflict in Ukraine require the use of a loud political voice and action that goes beyond expressing that political will by repeating the same positions in ever-changing contexts. The current context requires more than the holding of the usual political events in the region and needs the intensive involvement of Ljubljana and Zagreb, as the political voices of the Union (Craner 2022).

In 2022 Slovenian President Borut Pahor declared that initiatives such as the Berlin Process find their purpose in the positive experience of the Brdo–Brijuni Process summit, where unconditional dialogue and inclusiveness remain the fundamental values that guarantee the sustainability of the process itself. The current positive dynamics due to the renewal of the European commitment to the Berlin Process invite us to think about how regional initiatives could be re-dimensioned to encourage the achievement of tangible results in the European integration process. A re-dimensioning of the Brdo–Brijuni Process summit remains a necessity due to the increased involvement of Ljubljana in the Berlin Process, which remains of special strategic importance.

The Berlin Process is not only the beginning but also the future of the European integration path for the region. The realisation of its strategic goals can be achieved through the involvement of actors such as Ljubljana, as well as traditional Western political actors with ties to the Balkan region, such as Vienna.

The three agreements signed in Berlin within the framework of the Berlin Process, together with the ongoing objectives that the Western Balkan states are already working towards, require implementation by and approval from each state, and this will mean the overcoming of stalemates stemming from historical disputes. The achievement of the goals of the Berlin Process requires not only the involvement of all the Western Balkan states but also a proactive, integration-focused dialogue that has as its final goal the positive result of integration, that is, a dialogue that requires each country to bring tangible results to the table (Juzová 2019).

## **The roles of neighbouring EU countries**

### *Croatia*

The EU–Western Balkans summit held in Tirana on 6 December 2022 is not only proof of the EU's renewed attention to the countries of the region, but also gave the Western Balkan countries the opportunity to propose agreements in fields usually reserved for the EU member states, such as the 'Roaming Agreement' (Delegation of the European Union to Albania 2022). Actioning these proposals would increase cooperation with the countries of the Western Balkans and show political willingness on the part of the EU.

According to Elbasani (2013),

Croatia remains a successful guiding model for the countries of the Western Balkans that are still on the path to EU membership. Croatia's introduction of the euro and fulfilment of the criteria for membership of the Schengen area have turned the country into 'a first-rate political actor' in the European arena. This advancement of Croatia within the EU has transformed the country into a point of reference for the countries of the Balkans with regard to Euro-Atlantic integration.

The three agreements signed at the summit held in Berlin—which provide for free movement with identity cards, recognition of university degrees and recognition of qualifications for three professions: doctors, dentists and architects—still require approval by the national parliaments of each state (Regional Cooperation Council 2022). The process has been delayed because of the various unstable political situations in the Western Balkan countries: for example, in North Macedonia, the parliamentary crisis caused by the boycott of the right-wing opposition; and in Bosnia–Herzegovina, the situations linked to the visa regime with Kosovo and to the rhetoric of Republika Srpska in relation to the integrity of the country.<sup>1</sup>

The Berlin–Brussels–Paris axis would find in Croatia an actor able to overcome further delays and to lead the region towards European integration. However, Croatia needs a clear mandate from this political axis, for example, through its designation as a political emissary.

In terms of the role of the European Parliament and the leading parties, it should be noted that the European People's Party has a limited presence in the region, having not assigned its own rapporteurs to the Western Balkan countries. The Party should therefore encourage the appointment of Croatian rapporteurs in all the countries of the Western Balkans where this political group has the right to determine the rapporteur (Marini 2011).

## *Czechia*

The enlargement of the EU in 2004 remains the single most important political moment in Europe since the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Czechia is an important political actor with a geopolitical weight that comes from its political stability, geographical position and desire for EU enlargement.

The holding of the first meeting of the European Political Community, an initiative of French President Emmanuel Macron, in Prague in October 2022 is clear evidence of the political importance of the country since Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Grant 2022). The second half of 2022 also saw Czechia hold the Presidency of the Council of the EU, which coincided with continued Russian aggression. It was an effective Presidency with clear priorities in line with global developments and a strong desire to encourage the expansion of the Union through the integration of the Western Balkans. Consequently, Czechia stood clearly in favour of visa liberalisation for the citizens of Kosovo and the approval of candidate status for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Czechia is an important actor that can convey its expertise, encouraging and strengthening civil society and law-enforcement links with candidate and potential candidate countries, namely the countries of the Western Balkans. Its support for the process is due to its proximity to most of these countries, and their common history and political past (Grant 2022).

Czechia, together with Slovenia and Croatia, could act as a Western pole, not only in the role of political observer but also as a deterrent to Russian influence. This could be manifested in various ways: in political forums, as part of a tripartite mediation team in cases of political disputes and in the joint monitoring of parliamentary groups in the European Parliament (Cermak 2022).

Ensuring the requirements for integration are met is the best way to prevent the expansion of Russian influence, not only in terms of direct pressure from Moscow but also in terms of the spread of the Russian model of governance (i.e. a non-functioning democracy; a captured state, with bad governance, truncated freedom and authoritarianism) (Newlin and Lohsen 2022).

## *Poland*

The Polish presidency of the Berlin Process (in 2019) played an essential role in kick-starting the implementation of actions through the organisation of a variety of activities, such as civil society forums, youth events and the cities project (Borowska 2021). Its dynamism encouraged progress at a time when scepticism had increased, especially from the French side, due to the poor performance of the governments of certain countries. Scepticism had also gained momentum due to the high number of asylum seekers from the various countries of the region (Walsh 2019).

Poland can bring the positive experiences of the Visegrád Group to strengthening relations between countries and overcoming differences, not least as it is the only political power among the Visegrád countries not to have unresolved issues with any of the countries in the region. It has signed separate agreements with Albania, Montenegro and Serbia to assist in the process of integration and has defined a clear integration agenda. The country plays a leading role in the Three Seas Initiative, which includes the countries of the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas. The Initiative also has the ability to allocate investment funding (Walsh 2019).

Despite current geopolitical developments supporting a growing role for and the engagement of Poland, this will not be possible if its conflict with the EU regarding the government's approach to the reform of the Polish judiciary is not resolved (Koutsokosta and Liboreiro 2022). However, Poland's involvement could enable a deeper rapprochement that exceeds the political borders of the region. The connections with the Polish market in the field of tourism or in the facilitation of the movement of certain professionals could positively influence and strengthen the country's role.

## *Austria*

Austria has always been an important political actor in the Balkans. Its influence in the Balkan region remains essential for encouraging integration even when the commitment from either the Western Balkan countries themselves or the EU is lacking.

The visit of Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg to the Balkan region (in October 2022) and the publication of a conceptual ‘non-paper’ on the Austrian vision for the integration of the Balkan region offers hope for the gradual improvement of Belgrade–Pristina relations and progress with regard to the integration of the region as well. On the issue between Kosovo and Serbia, Schallenberg declared (Austria, Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs 2022):

The process of normalization must continue, through dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. Walking step by step towards normalization, because it is in the interest of stability in the region. If we talk about regional stability, the gradual normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina is very important. The dialogue is a needle’s eye through which the region is observed and that is why it is important.

On the concept of gradualism, he underlined that ‘our proposal is to treat the countries of the region step by step from one area to another, be it energy, trade or something else, as full members. The European perspective is not a one-way road. We are facing a radical shake-up of our security system in Europe. No one can hope to be a mere bystander’ (Nikolaus 2022).

Tomorrow’s Europe cannot be politically complete if the progress towards integration does not continue in the Balkans. Regional political actors can encourage this process through an effective, proactive gradualism that is in alignment with Western values. This includes insisting on the following of standards by the national governments in both domestic governance and their external relations. In particular, Austria plays a key role through its continued political presence in the region.

## **Conclusions**

The Berlin Process remains one of the most important paths towards the European integration of the Western Balkans. This process has two main components:

1. the overall guidance, control and assistance of the EU, in particular the European Commission; and
2. the contribution of individual EU member states, which have a direct interest due to their vicinity and shared regional challenges.

This article has analysed the impact and underlying interests, policies and decision-making of these regional powers. These states can work as a proxy for the EU as a whole,

taking advantage of their in-depth knowledge and close historical relations with the region. Yet, the main driving force behind the process has to remain the desire and commitment of the Western Balkans to undertake domestic reforms, battle authoritarian temptations, and strengthen the rule of law and the free market economy.

The Berlin Process provides a framework that enjoys broad national and political support in each of the participating states. The Open Balkans Initiative failed, however, as important actors in the region did not share the same ideas, and this jeopardised the whole process.

## Note

1. This designation is without prejudice to position on status, and is in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1244/99 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

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