Berlin Process Summit 2024
10th Anniversary

Civil Society & Think Tank Forum 2024

Conference Report

SÜDOSTEUROPA GESELLSCHAFT

Aspen Institute Germany

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FIVE KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 Making the Berlin Process Future-proof

The Civil Society and Think Tank Forum (CSF) of the Berlin Process (BP) underscored the importance of the Berlin Process initiatives. There was a consensus that the Berlin Process is important and has delivered many valuable initiatives such as the Common Regional Market and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), however, the process's weaknesses were also highlighted. Among the most pressing concerns were: first, the heavy reliance on hosting countries for funding, leading to uncertainties in long-term support, second, the lack of a structured, institutionalized body to coordinate activities, which has resulted in fragmented efforts, and third, limited local ownership, especially among marginalized groups and youth, which has hindered inclusiveness and limited the public's connection to the reforms.

To address these challenges, participants proposed several solutions. A sustainable, dedicated funding mechanism was suggested to ensure consistent support for civil society, environmental protection, and gender equality initiatives. The institutionalization of the Berlin Process, for example the establishment of an administrative body such as a secretariat, was also discussed, with a lively debate about the pros and cons of institutionalization. Additionally, to increase transparency and public trust, participants emphasized the importance of clear benchmarks, transparent monitoring mechanisms, and robust accountability frameworks. Civil society's role in monitoring and advocating for these reforms was highlighted as essential, ensuring that initiatives are visible and inclusive, and that they effectively address the region's developmental needs.

2 Prioritizing Trust-Building and Regional Cooperation

The CSF underscored that trust-building within the Western Balkans and with the EU is essential for sustaining collaboration and advancing EU integration. While initiatives like RYCO have successfully fostered regional understanding, more comprehensive frameworks for cooperation are still needed to support EU integration goals. Economic convergence emerged as a priority, with participants emphasizing that aligning economic policies across the Western Balkans could serve as a pathway to shared prosperity and stability in the region. This included, according to participants, removing trade barriers, promoting digital transformation, and building a Common Regional Market (CRM) that mirrors the EU's Single Market. Such economic integration would help address the structural inequalities driving emigration and would strengthen the region's collective bargaining position within the EU.

Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of dealing openly with historical grievances as a basis for trust-building. Acknowledging past conflicts and fostering reconciliation were viewed as essential steps to overcoming the divisive narratives that still influence politics in the region. Initiatives aimed at fostering cross-border exchanges, particularly among youth, and creating educational programs focused on historical understanding were recommended to help bridge these divides. Transparent communication, sustained political commitment, and the active involvement of civil society were also seen as critical in building trust both within the region and with the EU, ultimately reinforcing the stability and resilience of the Western Balkans.

3 Investing in Education, Skills, Training, and Life-long Learning

An important takeaway from the CSF was the need to invest in education and skills development for all segments of society, including both urban and rural areas, to foster inclusivity and shared values. Recognizing the impact of past conflicts on social cohesion, participants emphasized that education and skills training had to also address historical grievances as a foundation for trust-building. Programs focusing on critical thinking, historical understanding, and reconciliation were recommended to help bridge divides and promote unity across generations.

Participants also linked education and skills development to two significant transitions affecting the region: the green and digital transformations. According to the participants, the green transition required training in sustainable practices, renewable energy, and environmental management, while the digital transition called for improved digital literacy and technical skills to boost the region's competitiveness and innovation capacity. By aligning educational programs with these transitions, the Berlin Process could equip citizens—particularly youth and marginalized communities—with the skills needed to thrive in an evolving economic landscape, addressing issues like brain drain by creating local opportunities that encourage talent retention.

Expanding initiatives like youth exchanges and tailored skills training programs could further promote shared economic opportunities and social cohesion, ultimately better preparing the Western Balkans for EU integration, the participants underlined.

4 Incorporating Marginalized Voices into Policy Making

The CSF highlighted the importance of amplifying marginalized voices, particularly women, youth, and Roma communities, within policymaking. According to the participants, these groups faced distinct challenges, such as workforce discrimination, educational barriers, and limited representation, that could perpetuate social inequalities. To address these barriers, participants emphasized the need for dedicated resources and targeted policies to address these groups' unique challenges, ensuring their perspectives are integral to the region's growth. In particular, participants emphasized policies focused on economic inclusion, gender-sensitive measures, and targeted skills development programs. Initiatives like youth exchanges and social enterprises were highlighted as essential for empowering marginalized groups, fostering social cohesion, and ensuring that all communities contribute to the region's growth and integration with the EU.

5 EU Enlargement

The conference participants agreed that the Berlin Process was distinct from the EU enlargement process, focusing on fostering engagement and readiness for integration rather than replacing formal enlargement pathways. While the BP did not directly manage accession, it played a critical role in getting the WB countries ready for EU membership by enhancing regional cooperation, supporting the CRM, and advancing economic and political convergence, some participants emphasized. The BP's flexible, alliance-driven structure could be effective in preparing countries for EU integration without the extensive administrative demands of EU frameworks. By aligning closely with EU priorities—such as market integration, targeted reforms, and financial support—the BP remained well-positioned to aid the Western Balkans in building the stability and capabilities required for EU accession, participants agreed.


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SPOTLIGHT 1:
TEN YEARS OF THE BERLIN PROCESS: MILESTONES, SUCCESSES, AND CIVIL SOCIETY INVOLVEMENT

Mapping Study Presentation:

Marika Djolai
Visiting Research Fellow,
University of Peleponese,
Member of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG)

Silvana Mojsovska
Professor, Institute of Economics,
University "Ss. Cyril and Methodius" – Skopje

Moderation:

Stormy-Annika Mildner
Executive Director, Aspen Institute Germany

Speakers:

Manuel Sarrazin
Federal Government Special Representative for the Countries of the Western Balkans

Armand Skapi
Secretary General, Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs

Albert Hani
Secretary General,
Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)



The Civil Society & Think Tank Forum 2024 marked ten years of the Berlin Process. Celebrating this occasion, the opening spotlight discussion focused on the milestones, successes, and challenges of the process. Throughout the discussion, the important role of civil society was emphasized, including what could be done to ensure that their perspectives are heard by decision makers.

In addition to this, panelists discussed the potential institutionalization of the Berlin Process, weighing the pros and cons of a small secretariat for the process. The panelists underlined the importance of reconciliation within and between the Western Balkan countries, also stressing their support for the EU enlargement process.

A mapping study presented by Marika Djolai and Silvana Mojsovska highlighted the evolution of the Berlin Process, from its initial focus on reconciliation and regional cooperation to broader topics like civil society inclusion, political and security cooperation, environmental sustainability, and most recently gender issues. The Berlin Process was praised for providing a vital platform for member countries, civil society organizations, and EU institutions to collaborate. This praise was well indicated in Manuel Sarrazin's description of the Berlin Process: "The region belongs together, even when there is so much conflict, so many problems and so much history. The Berlin Process was able to give a table where everybody wants to come, […] where everybody wants to achieve something together."

Key successes noted in this panel included the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) and the Common Regional Market (CRM).

However, the panelists also acknowledged several challenges. One of these were uncertainties about the funding of the Berlin Process and its initiatives, which largely relied on hosting countries. Gender, women's rights, and environmental concerns were also noted as underrepresented areas. The potential institutionalization of the Berlin Process also sparked a lively debate. Panelists weighed the pros, such as improved coordination, accountability, and sustainable funding, against potential cons like the risks of politicizing the secretariat.

The topic of reconciliation was also a recurring theme. The panelists acknowledged the need for initiatives that bridge historical divides, highlighting the role of youth and cross-border programs to foster reconciliation. Albert Hani, Secretary General of RYCO, for example, highlighted RYCO's work in fostering cultural exchanges and cooperation among youth in the Western Balkans, showcasing how reconciliation efforts are succeeding in practice.

In conclusion, the panel recognized that while significant progress had been made, there remained a need for greater inclusion of civil society and marginalized voices, sustainable financial support, and potentially some level of institutionalization to ensure the Berlin Process continues to foster growth and cooperation in the Western Balkans.

SPOTLIGHT 2:
INCLUSION OF MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

Speakers:

Eriselda Sefa
Mayor of Lushnja, Winner of the Most Roma-Friendly Mayor Award 2024

Isak Skenderi
Executive Director, Voice of Roma, Askhali and Egyptians

Rahiela Mustafovska
Project Manager, Roma Foundation for Europe

Nadire Redjepi
Director for Western Balkans, REDI NGO

Usame Zukorlić
Minister Without Portfolio in Charge of Reconciliation, Regional Cooperation and Social Stability

Moderation:

Rejane Herwig
Policy Advisor, Department Eastern Europe, Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation



At the center of Spotlight 2 stood the inclusion of marginalized communities in the Western Balkans and within the Berlin Process. The social and economic inclusion of minorities in all aspects of public life is a key goal of the Berlin Process. Consequently, this spotlight sought to examine the barriers these groups face and to explore how the Western Balkans countries, the Berlin Process, the EU, and civil society can work together to empower these communities and to ensure their needs and perspectives are taken into account in future reforms.

The Roma community took center stage in the discussion. Key takeaways from the debates included the importance of the economic inclusion of Roma in the workforce, the need for government support and accountability for marginalized groups, the importance of investing in education and skill development, and the role of social enterprises in aiding these communities.

Rahiela Mustafovska opened the discussion by addressing the employment challenges Roma face, including job insecurity and workplace discrimination. She emphasized that Roma, being the youngest population in the region, should be viewed as a solution to workforce shortages rather than being seen as a social problem. She advocated for investments in education and skills development to create long-term economic benefits, aligning these efforts with the broader goals of the Berlin Process.

Nadire Redjepi reinforced this, pointing out that marginalized communities were often overlooked due to insufficient investment. Redjepi's social initiative, Ready Recycling, offers an example of how investment in Roma communities can generate both social, environmental and economic impact. However, she highlighted that the potential of the initiative was not fully realized due to a lack of government support and funding. Similarly, Eriselda Sefa, who has been awarded as Albania's 'Most Roma-Friendly Mayor', shared her experiences in integrating Roma through education and employment initiatives in Lushnja, Albania, showcasing successful community-based approaches. She explained that "in our efforts to foster inclusion we have adopted an open-door policy with a special focus on this community."

The issue of digital exclusion also surfaced, particularly for rural communities. Panelists highlighted the widening digital divide, which exacerbates inequalities in education and employment. The panelists agreed that investing in education and digital infrastructure was key to bridging this gap.

Another central theme of the discussion was the importance of holding governments accountable for implementing inclusion policies. Isak Skenderi highlighted that "one of the missing elements that we have here is the issue of accountability when it comes to the level of implementation of these measures and policies," calling for stronger mechanisms within the Berlin Process to ensure that these policies moved beyond paper commitments and were effectively implemented.

The overall takeaway from the discussion was clear: Investment in education and skills development as well as accountability measures are essential for the successful inclusion of marginalized communities. By empowering these groups, the Western Balkan countries stand to gain both socially and economically.

PANEL 1:
COMMON REGIONAL MARKET AND MOBILITY

Rapporteur from Civil Society:
Alban Hashani
Executive Director, "Riinvest" Institute

Speakers:
Tatjana Shterjova Dushkovska
Secretary General,
Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum

Elda Kalaja
Head of Office of the Secretary General,
Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)

Zdravko Ilić
Senior Technical Expert,
Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)

Odeta Barbullushi
Resident Professor, Department of European Transformation and Integration Studies,
College of Europe Tirana

Moderation:
Alexander Beribes
Western Balkans/Southeast Europe & Russia,
Konrad Adenauer Foundation



This panel explored the potential of a Common Regional Market (CRM) in the Western Balkans and the role of the Berlin Process in promoting market and economic integration in the region. Discussions among the panelists focused on key challenges related to mobility and migration trends, the importance of digital transformation, and the effective involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs) and think tanks in advancing the CRM and regional mobility. The key themes emerging from the discussion included regional economic integration, addressing trade barriers, leveraging digital transformation, the role of civil society and small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), as well as the need for political will and trust-building.

The discussion began by addressing the opportunities and challenges of establishing a CRM. Alban Hashani emphasized the CRM's potential to align the Western Balkans with the EU Single Market by facilitating the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people. At the same time, Hashani and others noted that political tensions, regulatory differences, and fragmented markets remained significant obstacles. Political will and governance reforms were highlighted as critical to overcoming these barriers.

Tatjana Shterjova Dushkovska added that regional economic integration was essential for preparing the Western Balkans for EU accession. She argued that expanding EU-style mobility agreements, especially in recognizing professional qualifications, would foster economic integration and enhance the region's competitiveness. Emphasizing the need for a shared commitment, she noted that "there must be a will to continue working together." Tackling trade barriers was seen as vital for achieving the CRM's full potential.

The panel also discussed the role of civil society and SMEs in driving economic integration. Panelists emphasized that CSOs should be more involved in policy discussions, offering data-driven recommendations and holding governments accountable. SMEs, particularly export-oriented businesses, were recognized as key to creating jobs and driving innovation, both of which were seen necessary for sustainable regional growth.

Digital transformation was identified as another important factor. Elda Kalaja argued that investing in digital infrastructure would reduce brain drain by offering skilled workers better opportunities within the region and fostering innovation. The panel agreed that digital connectivity was essential for modernizing the economies of the Western Balkans.

Political commitment and trust-building were central themes to the discussion. The panelists stressed that without stronger political will, progress on regional cooperation would remain limited. They highlighted that the CRM "is not just a matter of regional countries" but a pathway to integrate into the European Single Market, being complementary rather than competitory. The panel called for transparent monitoring frameworks to hold governments accountable and ensure that CRM commitments were met, emphasizing the importance of political dialogue between the Western Balkans and the EU.

PANEL 2:
EU INTEGRATION AND THE BERLIN PROCESS

Rapporteur from Civil Society:
Zoran Nechev
Head of the Center for EU integration/Senior Researcher, Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis Skopje – IDSCS

Speakers:
Maida Gorčević
Minister of European Affairs

René Troccaz
Special Envoy for the Western Balkans, Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs

Anja Wallau
Director for EU Basic Policy Issues, EU Coordination and EU External Affairs, Federal Foreign Office

Wojciech Kowalski
Adviser Western Balkan Strategy, DG NEAR, European Commission

Moderation:
Christian Hagemann
Executive Director, Southeast Europe Association



The second day began with a panel focused on how the Berlin Process can support and streamline EU integration efforts in the Western Balkans, with a focus on political, economic and institutional convergence. The conversation emphasized the importance of aligning the initiatives of the Berlin Process with EU standards, particularly regarding regional cooperation, civil society involvement, and institutional reforms.

The panelists praised the flexibility of the Berlin Process. As such, it operated outside of the EU's formal structures, allowing for more agile responses to regional needs. Initiatives like the CRM were highlighted as prime examples of how the Berlin Processes initiatives could drive regional economic convergence and prepare the region for eventual integration into the EU. The panelists also discussed how these initiatives helped address internal political tensions and fragmented markets in the region. By fostering regional cooperation, the Berlin Process helped to alleviate these barriers to integration, the panelists underlined.

The role of CSOs in ensuring accountability and driving democratic reforms was another central topic. The involvement of civil society was linked to maintaining the momentum of democratic reforms and monitoring commitments, especially in areas like rule of law and governance. Panelists agreed that CSO engagement could improve transparency and ensure that reforms extended beyond surface-level commitments, becoming deeply ingrained in the region's political culture. Minister Maida Gorčević emphasized that "the rule of law must be before the economic and other reforms" to ensure the stability and success of integration efforts.

Youth engagement and local ownership of reforms were also highlighted as critical to sustaining momentum towards EU integration. Programs that encourage youth participation, skills development and education were seen as essential to ensuring that the next generation was invested in the region's future, the panelists emphasized. Anja Wallau specifically called for expanding mobility programs to foster greater interaction between young people in the Western Balkans and the EU, thus strengthening their ties to the broader European project.

Long-term sustainability of the initiatives of the Berlin Process was another point of discussion. Several speakers called for a more structured and institutionalized approach to regional partnerships, ensuring continuity and consistent progress. Others, such as Wojciech Kowalski, praised the beauty of the BP's separation from the EU's more rigid structures, allowing the BP to be more flexible. Kowalski focused on regional cooperation and the CRM as areas where the BP has had the most value concerning EU accession, praising the process for its achievements in bringing the Western Balkan region closer to the EU. Civil society engagement was also seen as crucial for maintaining this long-term focus.

The panel also touched on the competitive dynamics within the region, particularly the "regatta principle," which placed Montenegro as a front-runner in the race for EU accession, as some panelists explained. Some participants questioned whether this approach really promoted unity or competition. However, the consensus was that a degree of healthy competition could motivate countries to work harder towards meeting the criteria for EU accession. This was particularly emphasized by Maida Gorčević, who described the competition as "the only approach," explaining that "small competition is something that is pushing us to be better, to perform better."

While the Berlin Process has helped move the region closer to EU integration, participants noted several areas where improvements could be made. These included enhancing predictability, increasing visibility, and ensuring that rule of law was more consistently addressed. Ultimately, the role of the Berlin Process in bridging the gap between the Western Balkans and the EU was reiterated by the participants, with regional partnerships and civil society playing key roles in achieving this goal.

PANEL 3:
GENDER & DIVERSITY

Rapporteur from Civil Society:
Tania Ivanova
President, REACTOR – Research in Action

Moderation:
Maja Stajčić
Senior Programme Officer,
Kvinna till Kvinna

Speakers:
Edi Gusia
Executive Director, Agency for Gender Equality /
Office of the Prime Minister

Julia Koch-De Biolley
Head of Task Force Gender & Diversity,
European External Action Service

Dušan Maljković
Coordinator of the Center for
Queer Studies Belgrade



Elevating the visibility and role of women in the Berlin Process and the Western Balkans emerged as a key theme throughout the conference, underscoring the critical importance of advancing women's rights in the region. This panel highlighted the commitment of the Berlin Process to making gender and diversity a core element of its agenda.

In response to the increasingly threatened rights of women and LGBTQIA+ people in the Western Balkans, the panel sought to address the role of the Berlin Process in relation to these often-overlooked topics. The speakers explored how gender equality and diversity could be better integrated into the Berlin Process and EU accession efforts, focusing on gender-sensitive policy making, rising gender-based violence, and the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ rights.

Throughout the discussion, the importance of placing gender equality as a core element of not only the Berlin Process but politics and civil society discussions in general, became clear. The panelists emphasized that gender-sensitive policies should be embedded across all initiatives. Edi Gusia underlined that "gender equality is not a visibility issue. 50 per cent of the population is there […] so we are not blind," expressing her frustration that gender equality often remained a side issue. She argued for more accountability in how initiatives of the Berlin Process address gender, linking it fundamentally to human rights and emphasizing that gender equality was not just about visibility but about who benefited from reforms.

The panel addressed a range of pressing social issues, including gender-based violence, LGBTQIA+ rights, and the growing influence of anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans. The panelists explained that violence against women continued to rise, while deeply ingrained homophobia and prejudices against LGBTQIA+ individuals often lead to discrimination and violence. Tania Ivanova noted the drawbacks of these movements, labelling them as a direct threat to "the progress of our society" that "make us fail in the societal transformation we need in order to move forwards." Adding to these challenges was the increasing influence of anti-gender movements, according to the panelists. Julia Koch-De Biolley emphasized the need for the EU's strong policy frameworks on gender mainstreaming, LGBTQIA+ rights, and gender action plans to be applied more actively to combat these threats.

The speakers stressed that education and awareness were critical to dismantling these harmful prejudices, with civil society and international organizations playing a vital role in resisting backlash from anti-gender movements. Addressing these issues collectively through a coordinated effort could foster a more inclusive society and ensure progress in gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights.

Approaching these issues through an intersectional lens and the importance of multi-stakeholder cooperation was also emphasized. The panel advocated for an intersectional approach to policy making, emphasizing that marginalized groups, such as women of color, rural women, and LGBTQIA+ individuals, needed to have a stronger voice in shaping the priorities of the Berlin Process.

PANEL 4:
ENERGY, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND DECARBONIZATION

Rapporteur from Civil Society:
Denis Žiško
Energy and Climate Change Program Coordinator, Aarhus Center

Moderation:
Verena Allert
Senior Advisor – Energy Transition Collaboration Western Balkans, Germanwatch

Speakers:
Borche Dimitrovski
Secretary of the Municipality of Bitola

Adam Cwetsch
Head of European Green Deal Unit, Energy Community N.N.

Sebastian Leuschner
Political and Climate Affairs Officer, German Embassy Pristina



This panel addressed the challenges and opportunities of transitioning to renewable energy in the Western Balkans, aligning with the EU's Green Agenda, and ensuring a just transition for coal-dependent regions.

The central theme was the green energy transition, with a focus on how the Western Balkans can shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy. Adam Cwetsch, for example, emphasized the importance of aligning regional climate and energy targets with the European Green Deal and the need for accelerated efforts to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. While the signing of the Green Agenda in 2020 was a positive step, implementing renewable energy policies had been slow, particularly in coal-dependent regions, the panelists agreed.

Borche Dimitrovski, from the coal-reliant municipality of Bitola in North Macedonia, highlighted the challenges of implementation, particularly the economic and social costs of transitioning away from coal. He noted that while decarbonization was necessary, the transition had to be realistic and take into account the economic realities of the region. Dimitrovski explained that "it's important to have a clean environment […] but I also don't want economic disaster for the region." The panel emphasized the need for a just transition for coal regions, advocating for policies that support workers and communities affected by the coal phase-out. This included, according to the panelists, economic diversification and re-skilling programs to ensure these regions thrive in a low-carbon economy. While significant funding from the EU was available, the panelists agreed that better coordination and more decisive political leadership were needed to ensure that these funds were used effectively to support the transition.

Climate adaptation and resilience were also discussed, with Denis Žiško stressing the need for regional cooperation to address climate-related risks such as floods and droughts. He pointed out that many reports and policies were not adequately implemented, leading to a gap between ambition and action. The lack of ownership and action by authorities had forced smaller organizations and communities to take matters into their own hands, installing renewable energy solutions themselves, some of the panelists highlighted.

Finally, in keeping with the topic of the forum, the panel highlighted the role of civil society in climate action, calling for greater involvement of CSOs in advocating for policies, raising public awareness, and holding governments accountable. Žiško criticized the current approach of governments and international bodies, which often excluded civil society from meaningful participation in decision-making processes. It was argued that civil society movements, such as those seen in other regions, were crucial for driving the green transition forward.

PANEL 5:
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Rapporteur from Civil Society:
Aleksandër Trajçe
Executive Director,
PPNEA

Moderation:
Katja Giebel
Senior Programme Officer East and South East Europe Division, Heinrich Böll Foundation

Speakers:
Eva Kracht
Director-General for International and European Policy, Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection

Lindita Shakiri
Head of Department for European Union, Ministry for Environment and Physical Planning

Fationa Cinaj
Head of the Department for Climate Change, Ministry of Environment and Tourism

Genci Nimanbegu
Mayor of Ulcinj



The panel on environmental protection and sustainable economic development focused on achieving the delicate balance between the two concepts in the Western Balkans. In particular, there was an emphasis on promoting sustainable development while preserving the region's biodiversity and natural heritage. The discussion highlighted the potential for environmental protection to yield significant economic benefits. However, it was emphasized that sustainable economic growth was contingent upon the continued preservation of the environment. Failure to prioritize environmental sustainability in pursuit of economic development risked undermining the long-term viability of these economic gains, the panelists argued.

The panelists proposed a variety of approaches. Aleksandër Trajçe emphasized the need to revisit and improve legal frameworks related to urban planning, energy development, and nature conservation. He highlighted how current practices, particularly infrastructure projects, were harming biodiversity and connectivity between natural areas. The panel agreed that sustainable development policies should prioritize green infrastructure and long-term environmental maintenance. Lindita Shakiri added that governments had to change their perception of environmental issues. She warned that governments in the region perceived "the environmental issues and all the steps that must be taken in the environmental sector as imposed by the EU and from abroad." She argued that a change in perception was integral to long-term prosperity.

The panel also highlighted the economic potential of circular economy initiatives, particularly by integrating marginalized communities, such as informal waste collectors, into the formal economy. This integration would not only boost economic growth but also reduce waste and promote recycling, contributing to both environmental and economic goals. Eva Kracht noted that over half of the global gross domestic product (GDP) depended on nature, making biodiversity conservation essential not only for environmental reasons but also for economic stability. She urged greater alignment of economic and environmental goals within the Berlin Process and EU accession strategies.

The discussion on renewable energy emphasized the need for careful planning. While renewable energy was seen as critical for future development, Trajçe warned against rushing into projects that could harm natural habitats. The panel advocated prioritizing energy efficiency before expanding renewable infrastructure to avoid damaging ecosystems essential to the region's long-term prosperity.

Societal involvement was another central theme. Genci Nimanbegu stressed the importance of public awareness and education, especially among young people, to ensure local engagement in environmental efforts. Cross-border cooperation in managing protected areas was also emphasized, as the region's ecosystems required collective action. CSOs were highlighted as key partners in driving sustainable policies and holding governments accountable for their environmental commitments.

In summary, the panel underscored the necessity of integrating environmental protection with economic growth to ensure long-term prosperity. A focus on legal frameworks, circular economy initiatives, and renewable energy was emphasized, alongside the critical role of public engagement and civil society in advancing sustainable development.

SPOTLIGHT 3:
RULE OF LAW AND FIGHTING CORRUPTION

Speakers:

Vigan Qorrolli
Deputy Minister of Justice

Desislava Gotskova
Head of Secretariat, Regional Anticorruption Initiative

Reinhard Priebe
Chair of the Senior Experts' group on rule of law issues, which prepared reports on the rule of law situation in North Macedonia (2015, 2017) and Bosnia and Hercegovina (2019)

Nemanja Nenadić
Program Director, Transparency Serbia

Moderation:

Andi Hoxhaj OBE
Lecturer in Law, King's College London



The rule of law and eradication of corruption are central conditions for the region's successful EU accession as well as a key priority of EU support to the Western Balkans. This panel addressed the critical issues of rule of law and corruption in the Western Balkans, focusing on judicial independence, the role of civil society, and the need for stronger regional cooperation to combat corruption and ensure effective governance.

The importance of the topic was solidified by Reinhard Priebe's statement that "the rule of law is a basic value in the EU treaty, and it is a condition for receiving new member states. It is one of these conditions where no compromises should be expected."

A key theme throughout this discussion was judicial independence and accountability. The panelists agreed that both were key to combating corruption and building trust in government institutions. Vigan Qorrolli emphasized that political corruption remained one of the most dangerous forms of corruption in the region, undermining trust in government institutions. Since rule of law is a core value for the EU and a non-negotiable condition for accession, the panelists agreed that a culture change was necessary within the region, particularly within the judiciary. Kosovo's efforts to depoliticize the judiciary and strengthen institutional accountability through anti-corruption task forces were cited as a positive example, but it was stressed that more needed to be done.

Building on the need for accountability, the panel also discussed the role of civil society in anti-corruption efforts. Desislava Gotskova emphasized the importance of CSOs in providing independent oversight, impact assessments, and public monitoring of anti-corruption measures. She noted that civil society had been instrumental in pushing for reforms and holding governments accountable, but its role needed to be further strengthened. The involvement of civil society should go beyond monitoring; they had to be empowered to influence policy and expose corruption at all levels, she argued.

The roles of regional cooperation and the EU in combating corruption were also paramount to the discussion. Regional cooperation was identified as a critical element in combating corruption effectively. Such initiatives could offer peer support, targeted funding and shared expertise, which were crucial for tackling corruption in a coordinated manner, according to the panelists. The panel agreed that regional efforts should not only focus on prosecution but also on prevention and public awareness campaigns. Concerning the EU's role in supporting reforms, panelists agreed that the EU had to remain firm in its expectations regarding rule of law in the Western Balkans. Reinhard Priebe noted that while the EU was facing its own rule of law challenges, it should not compromise on these values when engaging with the region. According to Priebe, these challenges should also "not be understood in the Western Balkans as a pretext or an excuse that the EU might become less strict on the rule of law." He also raised concerns about the slow progress of rule of law reforms, suggesting that part of the issue was the overwhelming amount of advice from multiple organizations, which could lead to confusion and a lack of clear direction.

Finally, the panel addressed the need to change public perceptions of corruption. Andi Hoxhaj summarized the panel's discussions, noting that corruption was not just a legal issue but also a cultural one. The panel called for education and awareness programs to change public attitudes toward corruption and build a culture of transparency and accountability. The panelists concluded by emphasizing the need for a sustained effort to foster a culture of independent judiciary and good governance, both at the institutional and societal levels.

PANEL 6:
DEALING WITH THE PAST AND RECONCILIATION

Rapporteur from Civil Society:
Sofija Todorović
Director,
Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) Serbia

Moderation:
Christian Hagemann
Executive Director,
Southeast Europe Association

Speakers:
Joachim Rücker
Former Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Kosovo,
Former President of the U.N. Human Rights Council

Nataša Kandić
Founder of the Humanitarian Law Centre



Coming to terms with the past and reconciliation remains a significant challenge in the Western Balkans, where nationalist rhetoric continues to deepen divisions. This situation poses a threat to the stability and the peaceful development of the entire region. The panel focused on how regional cooperation, civil society and youth engagement can address past conflicts and promote a peaceful future, particularly in the context of the Berlin Process and EU accession.

A key theme was the need for regional cooperation to address historical grievances and acknowledge past conflicts. The panel highlighted how the rise of divisive rhetoric was threatening the region's stability and reconciliation efforts. For reconciliation to succeed, countries had to collectively acknowledge the facts of past conflicts and work together to ensure accountability for war crimes, the panelists agreed. This required robust regional cooperation to ensure that trials were efficient and that the full scope of historical facts was brought to light. The panel emphasized that such cooperation was essential not only for healing but also for the region's democratic development and EU accession.

Civil society and youths were again seen as part of the solution to the problem. Civil society was identified as a vital actor in bridging gaps left by political leaders, particularly in promoting historical accuracy and supporting victims of conflict. CSOs could provide independent oversight, document war crimes, and advocate for victims' rights. However, the panel stressed that civil society faced numerous challenges, including shrinking political space and a lack of cooperation with state institutions. Despite this, CSOs had to continue to push for accountability, promote dialogue, and engage in educational efforts. Youth engagement was seen as crucial to fostering long-term reconciliation. It was pointed out that many young people in the Western Balkans were still grappling with the legacy of conflicts they did not experience first-hand, often adopting nationalist narratives from older generations since they had limited access to external, neutral information. To combat this, the panel called for youth-centered programs that encourage critical thinking and provide opportunities for young people to engage in reconciliation processes. Regional youth exchanges and educational initiatives were suggested as ways to help younger generations understand and process historical conflicts, breaking the cycle of inherited narratives.

Educational reform was also a major focus, with the panel advocating for changes to school curricula that promote a balanced and accurate understanding of historical events. The current education system often reflected nationalist biases, the panelists argued, which only perpetuated division. Introducing joint history textbooks and promoting cross-border educational collaboration were suggested as effective ways to foster a more unified historical understanding. The panel stressed that educational reform was essential to building a future rooted in peace and mutual understanding, rather than division and conflict.

The panel concluded by suggesting that reconciliation efforts should be guided by clear benchmarks and indicators to measure progress. These benchmarks would help ensure accountability among Western Balkans governments and provide a framework for evaluating the success of reconciliation initiatives. The panel emphasized that reconciliation was not only about addressing the past but also about creating a future of cooperation and peace, and clear indicators would ensure the process remains on track.

PANEL 7:
DISINFORMATION AND CYBER THREATS

Rapporteur from Civil Society:
Olivera Nikolić
Director,
Montenegro Media Institute (MMI)

Moderation:
Zoë van Doren
Policy Advisor for Global Digitalization and Innovation,
Friedrich-Naumann-Foundation for Freedom

Speakers:
Tamara Vujović
Minister of Culture and Media

Kataryna Kruk
Regional Public Policy Lead Central and Eastern Europe,
Meta



The rise of disinformation campaigns and cyber threats in the Western Balkans presents a growing challenge to the region's stability, democratic processes, and security. This panel focused on how the EU, national governments, civil society, and social media platforms can work together to combat these threats while protecting media freedom and digital rights.

The panel emphasized the need for stronger disinformation countermeasures and cybersecurity policies to safeguard the region's democratic processes. Disinformation was often used to exploit internal divisions, the panelists argued, and cyber threats were becoming increasingly sophisticated, targeting both government institutions and civilians. Harmonizing cybersecurity regulations across the Western Balkans was seen as essential, with calls for greater regional cooperation to align policies and share information. Olivera Nikolić stressed that the countries had to improve their cooperation and trust-building efforts to address technical barriers and harmonize legislation for a more coordinated response. She emphasized that "such a kind of situation calls for the action of all actors from the Western Balkans, governments, civil society, academics, and we are also calling for cooperation from very large platforms such as meta." This cooperation would potentially harmonize cybersecurity laws, create alliances to counter these shared challenges, and bolster the region's defenses.

Education on media literacy was highlighted as a critical tool in building resilience against disinformation. Tamara Milošević pointed out that media literacy programs, particularly in schools, were crucial for helping young people recognize and combat fake news. She emphasized that Montenegro's media strategy already included 15 planned measures to raise media literacy, but other countries in the region still had to follow suit. The panel agreed that such programs would not only raise public awareness but also empower citizens to be more discerning about the information they consume and share.

One of the key challenges discussed was balancing the fight against disinformation with the protection of media freedom. Kataryna Kruk emphasized the importance of ensuring that legal frameworks aimed at countering disinformation did not undermine freedom of expression. She warned that overly stringent regulations could erode trust in media freedom and democratic values, stressing the need for a balanced approach that aligns with EU digital standards. The panel recognized that the delicate balance between security and free speech had to remain a priority in any new legislation, with Kataryna Kruk emphasizing that "this is something we are always trying to keep in mind: balancing freedom of information but also security." Social media platforms, such as Meta, were identified as major players in the fight against disinformation. However, the panel recognized the limitations of self-regulation and the need for platforms to collaborate more actively with governments and civil society.

SPOTLIGHT 4:
YOUNG PERSPECTIVES – HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Speakers:

Anđela Jakšić-Stojanović
Minister of Education, Science and Innovation

Bora Muzhaqi
Minister of State for Youth and Children

Envera Moro
War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo

Ensara Reci
RYCO Local Program Officer in Albania

Lazar Simić
Student, Media Worker, Researcher and Activist

Adrian Flaig
Member of the Managing Board, Albanian Student and Academics Stuttgart

Moderation:

Adelheid Feilcke
Director of Programs for Europe, Deutsche Welle



The Western Balkans face significant challenges with youth emigration, which has a substantial impact on both economic development and democratic progress. The panel focused on how to engage with young people, highlighting the importance of youth participation, diaspora engagement, and the need to address the root causes of emigration.

The panel emphasized the need for more inclusive youth engagement in decision-making processes. Several representatives of the youth were included in the panel, ensuring they were successfully represented and allowing for a constructive dialogue between ages. Current approaches were discussed, such as Albania's incorporation of youth feedback into the national youth strategy by conducting local consultations with high school and university students, as well as young professionals. Based on their input, the government created local youth councils that work alongside city mayors. Having youth voices engaged in issues outside of youth engagement was seen as critical by the whole panel, which emphasized the importance of different perspectives in policy making and shaping societies. In addition to this, the panel stressed that engaging a wider range of voices, particularly from rural and marginalized communities, was critical for addressing the diverse needs of young people across the region. Overall, it was agreed that diverse voices should address a diverse range of topics to maximize potential.

One of the central concerns was the high rate of youth emigration, largely due to a lack of quality employment opportunities. Anđela Jakšić-Stojanović pointed at Montenegro's policies to combat this issue, including financial support for students through scholarships and professional practice programs that provide young people with work experience. She argued that creating better opportunities for young people at home was essential to reducing the emigration trend and retaining talent in the region.

In the light of the high rate of youth emigration, the panel also highlighted the importance of the diaspora in supporting economic development. Adrian Flaig emphasized that the diaspora was an underutilized resource, calling for stronger connections between governments and young people living abroad and emphasizing that "it is very important to include the diaspora into the process." The panel discussed how to engage more actively with this diaspora and attempt to reverse the trend of brain drain. Envera Moro also noted that the diaspora's involvement could bring valuable skills and expertise back to the region. To foster this connection, governments should focus on organizing initiatives that include the diaspora, offering them meaningful ways to contribute to their home countries' development.

Another significant issue raised was the challenge of disinformation and radicalization, which often affected young people, as the panelists pointed out. Lazar Simić highlighted that youth were frequently disconnected from broader European integration efforts and lacked visibility in initiatives like the Berlin Process. He called for better communication strategies using platforms like TikTok and Instagram, where young people were more active, explaining that "social media is where you need to go to inform and to be open to hear our questions and to hear our concerns." The potential benefits and usage of these platforms was often overlooked by older generations, panelist warned. Education was a central topic again, cardinal for countering disinformation and hate speech. The panel emphasized the need for curriculum reform to promote critical thinking and challenge harmful narratives, especially those found in textbooks that contribute to radicalization.

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