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2018 Western Balkans Summit: 3 key takeaways from London

By Zoran Nechev, Ivan Nikolovski, Jelica Minić, Mariola Qesaraku
and Adnan Ćerimagić

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Introduction

The Western Balkans Summit in London was the first meeting within the Berlin Process after the adoption of the European Commission's strategic document on the Western Balkans and the follow-up discussions during the Sofia Summit.¹ The London Summit was the last station of a half-a-year long trip of the EU engine aiming to change the backsliding climate in the Western Balkans and give a new impetus to their ruling structures starting to look for more interested regional and global partners. Finally, London was also the last Summit of the originally envisaged 5-years long Berlin Process. From this point onwards, the whole Berlin Process has become more uncertain without a clear strategy for its continuation or future prospects.

The Summit was accompanied with controversies. *We're still waiting for our host...* tweeted Michael Roth, the German Minister of State for Europe. Western

Balkan and participating EU member states ministers of foreign affairs did not have the pleasure of meeting their UK counterpart. Boris Johnson stood-up his colleagues and resigned from the position of UK's foreign secretary, only a couple of minutes before he was to address the summit participants. The news spread instantly and dominated reports about the Summit. However, this brief aims to put a light on what happened beyond the headings and to reveal the 3 key takeaways from the Summit.

¹ Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process Council Conclusions." Brussels: Council of the European Union, June 26, 2018. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf>

Nothing succeeds like success

From its outset, the Berlin Process had an aim to contribute to the improvement of bilateral relations and the resolution of bilateral disputes between Western Balkan states and their EU neighbours.² The Berlin Process has provided foremost space for Western Balkan leaders to meet and discuss open issues. Arguably, the dynamics of annual meetings has also created increased pressure on actors to deliver in order to show progress.

Montenegro was the first at signing two border demarcation agreements during the Vienna summit. The Agreement with Bosnia and Herzegovina was signed on 28 August 2015, and came into force the same year, as the first border demarcation agreement between two former Yugoslav republics. The Agreement with Kosovo was signed in 2015 during the Vienna summit as well, and came into force in

June 2018, after being ratified by the parliaments of Montenegro and Kosovo.

However, since the last summit in Trieste the most important progress has been made by Macedonia. First in August 2017, when the agreement with Bulgaria was signed. And then only three weeks before the London Summit, when the agreement with Greece was signed, ending the almost three decades-long name dispute.

This bilateral dispute and normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia were explicitly mentioned in the 2014 Berlin Summit's Final Declaration, showing the high importance that the EU and the Berlin Process attach to them.³ Thereafter there has been no substantial progress between two summits.

Furthermore, since Trieste, talks on border agreement between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia have been initiated, but prospects of reaching an agreement in foreseeable future remain rather low. The London Summit provided

² German Federal Government, "Final Declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans", 28 August 2014. <https://archiv.bundesregierung.de/archiv-de/meta/startseite/final-declaration-by-the-chair-of-the-conference-on-the-western-balkans-754634>

³ Ibid

space for a meeting between Greek and Albanian prime ministers, Alexis Tsipras and Edi Rama. The two countries had discussed bilateral issues earlier in 2018 and used the Summit in London to announce the signing of “a new document of a strategic partnership” between Greece and Albania.

The most visible outcome of the London Summit is the signing of a “Joint Declaration on Regional Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations.”⁵ It is positive to note that by signing this document signatories committed themselves to solve outstanding bilateral issues as a matter of urgency and to abstain from misusing bilateral disputes to block the EU path. Among the signatories is also Croatia, an EU member state since 2013, which has several bilateral disputes and has already played

with an idea or used its veto against neighbouring Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁶ This is an important step forward following Croatia’s refusal to sign a similar document in Vienna in 2015. Participants also agreed to meet in Vienna, six months after the London summit, and in Skopje, before the 2019 Summit, to take stock of progress made.⁷

The meeting in Vienna was a success. The countries from the Western Balkans, in general, agreed upon reporting procedure and template. In addition, the participants agreed to share publicly available information regarding bilateral issues, in the spirit of transparency. The Austrian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, as a host of the stocktaking event, acknowledged the importance of CSOs in the process by inviting them to the event. A discussion on the ways and means of

⁴ The National Herald, “Albanian PM: Greece, Albania to Sign Strategic Partnership Agreement”, 12 July 2018. <https://www.thenationalherald.com/207298/albanian-pm-greece-albania-to-sign-strategic-partnership-agreement/>

⁵ UK Government, “Joint declarations on regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations, war crimes and missing persons in the framework of the Berlin Process”, 9 July 2018. <http://wb-csf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Joint-Declarations-signed-at-the-Leaders-Meeting-of-the-Western-Balkans-Summit-by-Berlin-Process-participants.pdf>

⁶ Austria, Germany, Slovenia, UK, Poland, Italy, France, and Croatia.

⁷ UK Government, “Chair’s Conclusions of the Foreign Ministers meeting of the London Western Balkans Summit”, 9 July 2018. <http://wb-csf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Chair’s-Conclusions-of-the-Foreign-Ministers-meeting-of-the-London-Western-Balkans-Summit-9-July-2018.pdf>

their involvement in contributing to the success of this process took place.

Additional success worth mentioning, besides bilateral issues, is the inclusion of civil society. Finally, after years of advocacy, the civil society forum was recognised and organised by the host country as a formal part of the Berlin Process. For the first time, all six Western Balkan ministers of foreign affairs accepted to discuss issues of interest for the Western Balkans alongside civil society representatives and activists. Content-wise, the discussions were too general and did not reflect on the previous work done and recommendations provided by civil society organisations by way of civil society forum policy briefs. The briefs' primary intention was to feed-in the high level dialogue with data and information regarding the main topics of the London summit, namely: 1) Economic issues, 2) Security issues; 3) Legacy issues and 4) Gender issues.

Overshadowed event

In the complex structure of players, channels, and mechanisms operating in the region, the Berlin Process kept its relevance in supporting regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and its accession to the EU. However, it was transferred on the minor road. The European Commission's Communication of 6 February 2018, *A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans* 6 February 2018⁸, Sofia declaration of the EU-Western Balkans summit, 17 May 2018⁹, as well as *Council Conclusions of 26 June 2018*, welcoming "the launch of the Sofia Priority Agenda, which draws on the relevant aspects of the Commission's Communication adopted on 6 February 2018"¹⁰ marked the integration of the key achievements of the Berlin Process into the main track of the enlargement policy.

⁸ European Commission, "A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans," February 6, 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf

⁹ EU-Western Balkans Summit, "Sofia Declaration, 17 May 2018," May 17, 2018, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/34776/sofia-declaration_en.pdf

¹⁰ Council of the European Union, "Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process Council Conclusions" (Brussels: Council of the European Union, June 26, 2018).

Six Flagship Initiatives, proposed by the Commission in February, were adopted as *Sofia Priority Agenda* in May, absorbing most of the Berlin Process outcomes in the area of connectivity in all its dimensions – transport, energy, digital, economic and human. Even the issue of improving bilateral relations in the region and speeding up the reconciliation was integrated into the flagship initiatives/priority agenda.

However, the main focus of the short Chair's Conclusions of the Heads' meeting of the London Western Balkans Summit, 10 July 2018¹¹ was security and good neighbourly relations. The "main business" of the Berlin Process took place in Vienna, six days before. **Smart growth and regional economic integration were given most of the space in this side event which delivered Chairs' Conclusions of the Economy Ministers' Meeting of the London Western Balkans Summit, 4 July 2018.¹²**

The whole spectrum of very intensive activities, decisions, and documents in the field of economy was presented hereby: Skopje Western Balkans Digital Summit in April and launch of a Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans; Forth Joint Science Conference of the Berlin Process held in June 2018 in Rome; adoption of Regional Investment Reform Agenda (RIRA) and the launch at the Western Balkans Investment Summit in EBRD HQ, in London, in February, launching the online investment platform which presents the region as a single investment destination; establishment of WB6 Chamber Investment Forum Permanent Secretariat (to be placed in Podgorica); announcement by the European Commission of a new guarantee instrument, which will be established under the Western Balkans Investment Framework and launched in early 2019; Agreement to open negotiations on a Mutual Recognition Agreement on Professional Qualifications for selected

¹¹ Government of the United Kingdom, "Chair's Conclusions of the Heads' Meeting of the London Western Balkans Summit, 10 July 2018," July 10, 2018, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/724295/Heads_Meeting_-_Chair_s_Conclusions.pdf

¹² Government of the United Kingdom, "Western Balkans Economy Ministers Meeting, 4 July 2018: Chairs' Conclusions," GOV.UK, accessed November 8, 2018, v

¹³ Council of the European Union, "Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process Council Conclusions" (Brussels: Council of the European Union, June 26, 2018).

professions and Endorsement of Regional Principles for the Model of Recognition of Academic Qualifications.

Above all of that, the mainstream activity of the Berlin Process – launching and permanently extending the connectivity agenda – was not the key activity in London, but the main decisions were taken during the Sofia Summit where 11 new projects were added to the previous 20.¹³ Some updates were done during the London Summit, but the main body of this agenda became the asset of the accession process as policy reform achievements. This was particularly in the transport sector, where progressing faster than building of hard infrastructure and opened space for the region to join the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF)¹⁴ in the area of transport, as announced in the *Credible Enlargement Perspective*.

Nascent Post-Brexit UK engagement strategy for the region

UK's Foreign Office praised the role of the German initiative: "The Berlin Process, established in 2014, has already achieved a great deal in the region – advancing economic integration, building energy and transport links, and forging connections between civil society and young people."¹⁵

The UK government made an effort to complement these successes by strengthening the rule of law and security dimension of the process, but also the smart growth – digital transformation, combining digital education, innovation, entrepreneurship, and youth

¹⁴ European Commission, "Connecting Europe Facility - Innovation and Networks Executive Agency - European Commission," Innovation and Networks Executive Agency, accessed November 8, 2018, / inea.europa.eu/connecting-europe-facility.

¹⁵ Government of the United Kingdom, "PM Reveals Package of Measures to Promote a More Peaceful, Prosperous and Democratic Western Balkans," GOV.UK, accessed November 8, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-reveals-package-of-measures-to-promote-a-more-peaceful-prosperous-and-democratic-western-balkans>.

¹⁶ Government of the United Kingdom, "UK Hosts Western Balkans Summit," GOV.UK, accessed November 8, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-hosts-western-balkans-summit>.

components. For increasing digital skills and employment prospects of youth in the region, the UK government devoted £10¹⁶ million in addition to almost £90 million for increasing capacities mainly in the domain of security.

One of the main aims of the London Summit was to contribute to increasing economic stability with a view to improving the business environment, encouraging entrepreneurship, addressing youth unemployment, and promoting regional inter-connectivity. In that respect, the Department for International Trade announced that its *Global Entrepreneur Programme* (GEP)¹⁷ would be expanded into 6 new Western Balkan countries, strengthening UK relationships with the region and promoting investment. This was announced by the Minister of Trade, Baroness Fairhead, at the special

event with young innovative entrepreneurs from the Western Balkans.

The UK government has promised to increase its financial support to the region by over 95% to £80 million in 2020-2021. It will be directed towards projects in areas of public administration and judicial reforms, improving business environment and strengthening democracy.¹⁸ The UK committed itself to invest £1 million in the region's cyber capability, £10 million to help build digital skills among young people, £1 million for reconciliation efforts, £4 million program to expand the Westminster Foundation for Democracy in the region and to double the number of UK staff working in the region on security issues.¹⁹ **Amid UK's departure from the EU, the commitment towards Western Balkans should be seen as a sign of UK's readiness to remain engaged in the region as an EU partner.**

¹⁷ Government of the United Kingdom, "Global Entrepreneur Scheme Set to Boost Trade with Western Balkans," GOV.UK, accessed November 8, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/global-entrepreneur-scheme-set-to-boost-trade-with-western-balkans>.

¹⁸ UK Government, "PM statement at London Western Balkans Summit", 10 July 2018. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-at-london-western-balkans-summit-10-july-2018>

¹⁹ UK Government, "UK hosts Western Balkans Summit", 10 July 2018. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-hosts-western-balkans-summit>

Overall success story of the Berlin Process

The Sofia Priority Agenda managed to integrate most of the Berlin Process outcomes in the area of connectivity whether that is transport, energy, digital, economic and/or human. This is in addition to the issue of improving bilateral relations in the region and speeding up the reconciliation, also integrated into the flagship initiatives/priority agenda.

This convergence could be considered as a great success of the Berlin Process which gave the “main body” and some instruments to the enlargement/accession process, especially in the economic and social development domain where adoption of the *acquis communautaire* is not sufficient by itself. **The Berlin Process gave an additional push to reforms and investments in transport and energy fields, digitalization, trade, investment and labour market in the Western Balkans, always in coordination with the relevant EU**

institutions and regional organisations and specialised bodies created by the Commission (like the Western Balkan Investment Framework).

The most important question related to the Berlin Process is the kind of future it has. Arguably, the main aim of the Berlin Process, when started in 2014, was to show that the EU still focuses on the Western Balkans. The process has served that purpose and achieved a list of points also laid out in this paper. In the upcoming year when UK's departure from the EU is expected, as well as European Parliament elections and the new Commission, signals of continuing commitment and focus to the Western Balkans is needed. It is essential that its continuation is accompanied with clear and streamlined agenda providing additional impetus and framework for regional cooperation beyond the auspices of the EU integration process.

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Information about SEE Think Net

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The SEE Think Net Network was established in mid-march 2018 with the generous support of the European Fund for the Balkans as the first regional network composed of civil society organisations that aim to monitor the topics related to the Berlin Process. The Network encompasses think tanks, civil society organisations and individuals from the 6 Western Balkan countries plus Croatia and Slovenia. Besides the Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” (IDSCS) which will coordinate the Network, the SEE Think Net Network includes the Network of the European Movement in Serbia (NEMinS), Open Society Foundation for Albania and its affiliate, the EU Policy Hub, Adnan Ćerimagić, Politikon Network from Montenegro, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, the Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO) from Croatia and the Centre for European Perspective (CEP) from Slovenia. The goal of the SEE Think Net Network is to produce significant policy inputs and provide policy recommendations on topics that derive from the Berlin Process. As such, its activities are devised in order to closely monitor the Berlin process and the policy areas the process encompasses.

Information about SEE Think Net Coordination

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Information about EFB

The European Fund for the Balkans is designed to create and support initiatives aimed at strengthening democracy and fostering European integration by enabling inclusive policy making, supporting capacity development and creating a platform for exchange and co-operation in the Western Balkans. The Fund was launched in 2007 by four European private foundations (King Baudouin Foundation, Erste Foundation, Robert Bosch Stiftung and the Compagnia di san Paolo), within the framework of the Network of European Foundations.

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