



Western
Balkans
Summit
BERLIN 2022

Civil Society & Think Tank Forum 2022

Conference Report
and Policy Recommendations



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This publication was developed in the framework of the 2022 Civil Society & Think Tank Forum, a two-part conference to support the Berlin Process, a German government initiative aimed at supporting the EU integration process of the Western Balkans. The forum consisted of a Digital Preparatory Workshop, where civil society representatives from the Western Balkans gathered in online working groups to develop policy recommendations on six different topics, and a Conference in Berlin, where these recommendations were presented and further discussed with decision-makers. Our working group rapporteurs were then invited to report the recommendations to heads of government at the Western Balkans Summit in the German Chancellery as well as at the preceding meeting of foreign ministers. In the following weeks, they were also given opportunities to meet one-on-one with key stakeholders from Germany and the EU to discuss their proposals in greater depth. This publication includes the final policy recommendations from this process as well as a short report by the organizers on the conference proceedings.

We thank the German Federal Foreign Office for their generous support and for entrusting the Southeast Europe Association and the Aspen Institute Germany with hosting the 2022 Civil Society & Think Tank Forum.

The policy recommendations in this publication were jointly developed in thematic working groups by civil society representatives from the Western Balkans. They do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Southeast Europe Association, and the Aspen Institute Germany or the Federal Foreign Office.

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Photography: Christian Kruppa
Layout: Volk Agentur + Verlag
Printing: Fata Morgana Verlag

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Foreword

The Southeast Europe Association and the Aspen Institute Germany had the honor of jointly organizing the 2022 Civil Society & Think Tank Forum (CSF) in the framework of the Berlin Process. The Berlin Process is an initiative of the German government, initiated in 2014, that aims to promote regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and a closer alignment with the European Union. The associated CSF aims at strengthening the voice of civil society in the Berlin Process and to promote cooperation among civil society organizations and think tanks from the region and from the EU.

The CSF 2022 was designed as a two-part event consisting of a Digital Preparatory Workshop, where civil society representatives gathered in thematic working groups to develop specific policy recommendations, and an International Conference in Berlin, where these recommendations were presented and discussed with decision-makers and stakeholders from the Western Balkans and the EU. Key subjects of this year's CSF were the Green Agenda (with its subtopics energy transition, climate change, and environmentally sustainable development), sustainable infrastructure investments, information disorder, as well as the EU integration process in a changing geopolitical context. Further topics discussed at the CSF were promoting the rule of law and fighting corruption in the region, reconciliation efforts, the situation of Roma and other minorities, as well as regional economic cooperation.

The thematic working groups were prepared and moderated by civil society organizations from the Western Balkans. The moderators also served as rapporteurs from civil society presenting and discussing the thematic recommendations at the conference in Berlin. The rapporteurs were also invited to the Foreign Ministers' Meeting as well as the Berlin Process Summit Meeting of heads of states and governments to share key results and recommendations from the forum. Following the CSF, the civil society



Dr. Christian Hagemann
Director · Southeast Europe Association

rapporteurs were also given the opportunity to meet one-on-one with key stakeholders from Germany and the EU to again present and discuss the recommendations put forward by civil society.

This publication contains the thematic policy recommendations developed in the framework of this process by civil society from the Western Balkans. It also includes a report on the conference in Berlin. All panel discussions can also be rewatched on the respective Youtube channels of the Southeast Europe Association and the Aspen Institute Germany.

We would like to use this opportunity to thank the German Federal Foreign Office for its generous support of the CSF 2022 and for entrusting the Southeast Europe Association and the Aspen Institute Germany with the organization of the forum. For their strong commitment and intense efforts in strengthening the voice of civil society in the Berlin Process we would also like to thank our civil society rapporteurs: *Simonida Kacarska*, *Ardita Abazi Imeri*, and *Malinka Ristevska Jordanova* from the European Policy Institute in Skopje (Working Group on EU Integration), *Marko Sošić* from Institut Alternativa in Podgorica, and *Ardian Hackaj* from the Cooperation and Development Institute in Tirana (Working Group on Infrastructure Investments), *Tijana Cvjetičanin* from Rasrinkavanje in Sarajevo, and *Jelena Berković* from Faktograf in Zagreb (Working Group on Information Disorder), as well as *Jovan Rajić*, Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute (RERI) in Belgrade (Working Group on Energy Transition), *Rinora Gojani* from the Balkan Green Foundation in Pristina (Working Group on Climate Change), and *Endri Haxhiraj* from the Institute for Environmental Policy in Tirana (Working Group on Protection of the Environment and Environmentally Sustainable Development). We would also like to thank both our teams at the Southeast Europe Association and the Aspen Institute Germany who worked restlessly to make the Civil Society & Think Tank Forum 2022 a success.



Dr. Stormy-Annika Mildner
Executive Director · Aspen Institute Germany

Opening Speech at the CSF by German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock (Video Message)



A warm welcome to you at the Civil Society Forum – it's great to have you in Berlin!

When I became German Foreign Minister last year, one of my first trips abroad was to the Western Balkans. And I vividly recall the meetings I had with you – representatives of civil society: With journalists who work with great determination to get to the bottom of corruption cases. With activists who search for missing persons and promote reconciliation between former enemies. The work of civil society is crucial.

I'm convinced that foreign policy is about more than contacts between ministers and capitals. It's also about facilitating exchange between students or academics. It's about listening to the ideas of researchers and activists. And, in many cases, it's such input that makes us in government realise: There's an issue that we should take up with our counterparts at our next meeting. Or a fresh idea that can help us resolve a diplomatic impasse.

That's why the Civil Society Forum is and will remain at the core of the Berlin Process.

Together, we are united by one goal: bringing your countries into the European Union.

For this, we need your insights and your criticism – and we're privileged to support your work: from youth exchanges to climate protection to defending independent journalists.

That's all the more important at a time when Russia, with its aggression against Ukraine, has brought war back to the European continent. President Putin is attacking everything we believe in: freedom, democracy and human rights. Many of you experienced the horrors of war yourself – in the Western Balkans, just over 20 years ago. You know what it feels like when mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers will never hug their children, their siblings again.

That's why I'm grateful that you have been making your voices heard: Against Russia's war and its brutal violence. And for a European future for the Western Balkans – where children, women and men can live in freedom and in peace together.

Yes, reconciliation takes time. European integration takes time. But I'm deeply convinced that, together, we can build this future.

Thank you.

Civil Society Recommendations

Green Agenda I: Energy Transition

The Western Balkans (WB) region is struggling in the early stages of the energy transition. A more decisive approach and a shift from fossil fuels is needed in order to comply with the obligations undertaken during the previous decade. Especially with the war in Ukraine, now more than ever, a regional approach is needed in order to enable WB governments to accelerate compliance with the EU system and the integral European market.

Western Balkan Governments Should:

- Comply with national and international policy and legal frameworks and fulfill the obligations undertaken.

The EU and its Member States Should:

- Stress the importance of the rule of law in the Western Balkans region as a prerequisite for the implementation of the Green Agenda and the energy transition;
- Insist on progress in the implementation of the obligations undertaken under the Energy Community Treaty and other international treaties and documents, including the Large Combustion Plants Directive/Industrial Emissions Directive (LCPD/IED) standards and obligations;
- Initiate an amendment of the Energy Community Treaty in order to involve parliaments of the parties to commence the energy transition strategic planning and the implementation of the Western Balkans Green Agenda;
- Initiate an amendment of the Energy Community Treaty in order to set up restrictive deadlines and align them with the material obligations, including LCPD/IED requirements, renewable energy obligations, and decarbonization;
- Facilitate/finance an independent report to the European Parliament on the implementation of the Energy Community Treaty accompanied by a proposal for further actions in order to induce an appropriate debate on EU level;
- Insist on the responsibility of regional governments for non-compliance with the obligation undertaken within the Energy Community Treaty concerning National Energy and Climate Plans

(NECPs), National Emission Reduction Plans (NERPs), etc.;

- Monitor more closely the development and the implementation of the public policy documents and legislative processes that are being funded from EU funds, such as NECPs, Air Quality Strategies, etc.;
- Strengthen transparency, anti-corruption and accountability criteria for EU funded projects and programs;
- Monitor and request the utilization of best available techniques (BAT) in accordance with BAT standards in large scale energy projects in the region;
- Insist on improving competition principles and transparent public procurement procedures related to the energy policy and strategy determination and implementation of strategic and infrastructural energy projects in the Western Balkans;
- Support the inclusion of civil society organization (CSOs) and think tanks in the monitoring process of implementation of the above-mentioned projects and programs (e.g., Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) projects);
- Insist on an effective and timely public consultation in the decision-making processes concerning energy transition (preparation and adoption of strategic documents), in order to provide functional platforms for CSOs, think tanks, trade unions, and interested individuals for the formulation of functional and sustainable solutions;
- Rethink the current processes, competences and authorizations of the institutions and stakeholders dedicated to energy transition in the WB (e.g., Energy Community), in order to make their roles more operational and effective;
- More closely monitor and report on the breaches of the Energy Community Treaty, Aarhus Convention and the UNFCCC Paris Agreement obligations by the WB governments;
- Uphold a regional approach towards the WB governments through a functional and effective platform, especially concerning the funding of the energy transition;
- Establish a dedicated fund to finance economic restructuring of the coal regions from different

sources (e.g., combined national and EU funds), based on the existing platforms of the European Commission; closely monitor the utilization of these funds to ensure that the funds are spent for the purpose they were granted;

- Support the inclusion of a wide spectrum of stakeholders, including local governments, educational institutions, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and CSOs, in the preparation and implementation of the projects pertaining to the restructuring of coal regions;
- Encourage governments of the region to elaborate a systematic approach towards the energy transition, considering various neglected aspects (social, economic, educational, etc.);
- Monitor and help in the strategic planning of the regional governments concerning the redefinition of the economies and industries (construction, infrastructure, agriculture, etc.) due to the energy transition process;
- Systematically tackle the rising issue of energy poverty in the Western Balkans and reallocate donor funding to the people in need;
- Provide comprehensive support (i.e., financial, technical, knowledge transfer) for the acceleration of the RES solutions with low environmental impact;
- Increase support to the decentralized bottom-up approach involving local governments, companies, citizens and their associations, thus supporting the democratization component of the energy transition;
- Communicate and prepare a plan of steps and activities to merge the regional WB electricity market with the internal European market.

The Energy Community Should:

- Utilize available legal and policy tools in order to ensure the contracting parties' compliance with the obligations undertaken within the Energy Community Treaty;
- Enforce responsibility of the regional governments for non-compliance with the obligations undertaken within the Energy Community Treaty concerning e.g., National Emission Reduction Plans (NERPs);

- Intensify communication with the EU bodies and authorities in order to set sustainable enforcing mechanisms, through the amending of the Energy Community Treaty, in order to push the signatories of the Energy Community Treaty to comply with the obligation undertaken under the Treaty;
- Include a wider spectrum of criteria in assessing the accomplishments of the member states covered under the annual report. For example, in case of the adoption of policy/strategic documents: assess the procedure of preparation and adoption, the content of the document, and the compliance with the objectives and the requirements of the Energy Community Treaty, etc.;
- Design a more effective and operational approach in case of breaches and non-compliance with the applicable legal and policy framework by the member states, including, but not limited to, establishment of judicial authority on the Energy Community level.

CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans Should:

- Be more proactive and utilize their knowledge, skills, and ideas in the policy development processes;
- Establish a functional regional platform of CSOs/ think tanks to communicate joint WB issues in the field of energy transition to the EU and other relevant institutions;
- Advocate to be recognized as a partner in the decision-making and planning processes, especially during the preparation of the strategic policy documents;
- Establish more independent and effective monitoring of the implementation of the Green Agenda;
- Hold their governments accountable for their inaction and breaches of national and international obligations.

Green Agenda II: Climate Change

The Western Balkans (WB) are highly susceptible to climate change. The cities in the region continuously rank among the most polluted cities in Europe, where citizens lose up to 1.3 years of life due to air pollution. High emission levels continue to increase temperatures in the region, inevitably leading to extreme weather conditions. There are three main sectors in which emissions need to be lowered in order to deal with the increasing air pollution: the heating, transport and industry sectors. Recognizing these growing challenges, the WB6 countries have set ambitious targets to tackle climate change by signing the Sofia Declaration on the Implementation of the Green Agenda, including a coal phase-out until 2050.

In order to improve the situation, below are listed recommendations for the region's governments, the EU/EU member states/the international community, and civil society/think tanks from the region.

Western Balkan Governments Should:

- Intensify cooperation in terms of interconnectivity between the WB6 and increase communication on transboundary air pollution and interconnectivity (power grid, coordination of energy transition amongst WB6 and the EU);
- Initiate joint awareness-raising campaigns between the WB6 (for example run by Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) or Western Balkans Fund (WBF) about air pollution, climate change mitigation, sustainable transportation, etc. and how everyone can contribute to mitigating these problems;
- Increase financing for climate change measures and ensure a specific budget allocation;
- Set forth transparent measures for decarbonization in the following key sectors and ensure their implementation:

Energy:

- Remove legal and administrative barriers for Renewable Energy Sources (RES) development (e.g., one-stop-shops for RES projects);
- Lower import taxes on solar panels (as Albania has);
- Develop a concrete plan for a coal phase-out;

Transport and Green Mobility:

- Introduce friendly infrastructure for green mobility and expand public transport networks to discourage the use of cars in cities;
- Connect railway systems to the EU railway grid and open new cross-border railway connections;

Household Sector:

- Design national programs for energy efficiency measures such as retrofitting the building stock, the replacement of stoves and boilers with efficient ones, efficient heat pumps for heating and the expansion of the district heating system (supported by grants or subsidies).

- Prepare for the European Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) to adopt their carbon pricing mechanism;
- Build climate partnerships with Germany and the EU for the transfer of knowledge and skills;
- Adapt to climate change and introduce nature-based solutions to climate change impacts, especially in agricultural areas prone to floods and droughts – these are actions that sustainably manage ecosystems to address societal issues such as food security, water security, or human health;
- Increase cross-sectoral institutional coordination, improve communication between the local and national authorities, and increase financial capacities to introduce adaptation measures to tackle negative climate change effects;
- Strengthen cross-boundary cooperation between specialized agencies/institutions.

The EU/EU Member States/the International Community Should:

- Establish climate partnerships between Germany and all WB6 countries (similar to the one with Serbia), and in this framework:
- Develop an assessment mechanism to evaluate the progress of the partner country;
- Involve CSO representatives in steering committee meetings that oversee the implementation of the partnership;

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- Make sure that in case of non-delivery the partnership and financial transfers can be paused/ended;
 - Increase support, technical assistance, and transfer of knowledge in order to support a just energy transition in the region (e.g., reinvest CBAM revenues from imports from the region in the Western Balkans);
 - Push for the implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan towards its pillar of the green transition and digitalization to ensure a fair and inclusive transition and acknowledge the key role of women in fighting climate change, including on the household level;
 - Support the WB6 to build new railway infrastructure and connect railway systems of the WB6 with the EU and open new cross-border railway connections;
 - Rapidly include the Western Balkan countries into the EU Emission Trading System (ETS) mechanism and, consequently, the trading system by providing the electrical and district heating companies in the Western Balkans with the free allocation similar to the allowance made to the EU member countries by Article 10c (Option for transitional free allocation for the modernization of the energy sector) of the Directive 2018 /410;
 - Support green energy cooperatives promoted and built by citizens.
- Raise awareness and build knowledge amongst citizens, officials and civil servants, media and other civil society organizations on key issues, such as land degradation and its impact on climate change, energy efficiency measures, nature-based solutions, air pollution and gender impact;
 - Participate in public climate change discussions on both the central and local level, public hearings, working groups and public consultations;
 - Hold the governments accountable for their commitments, including related to national legal frameworks but also deriving from EU accession documents which are binding for WB countries;
 - Use legal tools and instruments to expose responsible political and economic actors to their legal and social responsibility towards climate and nature.

CSOs/Think Tanks from the Western Balkans Should:

- Put a stronger focus on following the climate change impact for their target groups in order to build community awareness on climate change;
- Implement collaborative projects among each other which have a multidimensional approach to tackle the impacts of climate change;
- Provide platforms for and facilitate cross-border cooperation via multi-stakeholder cooperations on issues related to climate change;
- Create mechanisms and tools for recording data and the progress made by institutions in fighting climate change and emissions in order to simplify information for the wider audience and to motivate citizen engagement;

Green Agenda III: Protection of the Environment and Environmentally Sustainable Development

In order to protect the environment and to achieve environmentally sustainable development in the Western Balkans, as has been agreed in the framework of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, increased efforts by all involved actors are needed. In this regard, CSOs demand from the WB6 governments with the support of the EU and its Member States the establishment of approaches to environmental management that give people the quality of life they seek while protecting the environmental systems that are also the foundations of our well-being.

The following recommendations should thus be carefully considered and applied.

Western Balkan Governments Should:

- Support obligatory participation of relevant NGOs in all government decisions regarding nature conservation and biodiversity, e.g., implementation of Natura 2000, waste management, forest management, combating corruption and organized crime in the field of nature conservation;
- Consider including NGOs in the implementation of developing projects to improve the current situation where decisions are taken from above (or not considering all steps) and regulations are violated;
- Apply co-creation methodology in environmental protection because it implies participation and interaction between all stakeholders such as academics, CSOs, businesses, and public institutions;
- Support Roma people to move from grey to green economy backed by clear political and financial decisions;
- Allocate more funds for biodiversity research and information exchange with the NGO sector, including the consideration and use of available data from realized project activities;
- Accelerate the activity of courts competent for administrative disputes to counteract unlawful acts of public authorities in the environmental sector;
- Increase efforts in environmental law implementation by strengthening and training relevant institutions and the responsible agencies, the inspection staff as well as the police to persecute environmental crimes;
- Advocate and perform public campaigns designed to raise awareness about the importance of a circular economy among all parts of society, the economic sector, as well as in public institutions, as a necessary means to counter ongoing waste mismanagement and illegal practices;
- Integrate good practices in terms of waste management (the 5 R's: Refuse, Reuse, Recycle, Recover, Residual waste management) into existing legislation;
- Solve problems in horizontal communication among ministries, public institutions and other governmental bodies which often lead to a delay in environmental policy making;
- Consider a moratorium on hydropower plants across the Western Balkans to enhance biodiversity conservation;
- Inform farmers about the use of fertilizers in the agricultural sector in order to prevent its uncontrolled use and soil pollution. The law enforcement agencies in the agricultural field should prohibit the use of pesticides banned in the EU;
- Start reforestation in the Western Balkans which still provide one of the best areas in Europe for growing new forests and thus contribute to job creation and mitigation of climate change;
- Add support to massive reforestation to the just energy transition measures;
- Support biodiversity in diminishing landscapes within agricultural areas (e.g., encourage the planting of shrubs, shorelines, crop rotation, etc.);
- Build a recycling and waste management sector with the goal of reducing greenhouse gas emission levels and achieving a circular economy (learn from Germany – Germany's recycling and waste management sector has been taking the lead in greenhouse gas emission reductions for decades);
- Build an integrated waste management at a regional level and foresee a strong involvement of the municipalities;
- Introduce Producer Responsibility Schemes and deposit refund systems;

- Support sustainable agriculture and establish a network of areas with conservation interest such as the Emerald Network of Areas of Special Conservation Interest or officially adhere to the Network;
- Strengthen the cross-boundary cooperation on the government level for the sustainable use of nature resources;
- Ensure the functionality of protected areas through the adoption of specific management plans for protected areas;
- Pay attention to the interconnectivity of important natural habitats, such as protected areas or other ecological network areas from the initial phase of infrastructure projects planning;
- Pay substantial bonuses to staff of protected areas based on objective results regarding the achievement of environmental targets.

The EU and its Member States Should:

- Put pressure on WB governments to implement laws and directives regarding biodiversity protection, nature and landscape conservation, as well as air, waste, soil, and agriculture pollution;
- Put pressure on WB governments to implement the Green Agenda;
- Put pressure on WB governments to involve all stakeholders such as CSOs, investors, businesses, trade unions, experts, as well as affected local communities in the working groups;
- Increase efforts and develop instruments to involve civil society, citizens, and other stakeholders in the creation of environmental solutions, going beyond their role of monitoring and lobbying. CSOs demand real participatory concepts in the development of such solutions;
- Support and strengthen CSOs in the WB that work on Green Agenda-related topics, intensify cooperation with them, and increase the communication with other non-governmental stakeholders and support communication platforms;
- Not support the industrialization of agriculture in the WB6 region as this will cause huge damage to the connectivity of nature. The WB6 can use the developmental gap to start with “green agriculture” in the first place;

- Establish binding documents between local authorities in the region and the EU, related to the operation and maintenance of EU investments in the sector of environmental protection and waste management. In this regard, it is necessary to closely monitor the process when handing over public services from the EU to the local governments;
- Involve parliaments of WB6 in the strategies adopted in the framework of the European Green Deal due to the lack of results from the engagement of WB governments only;
- Consider recommendations of previous Civil Society Fora pertaining to the Green Agenda as they are still relevant to this day.

Recommendations to Other International Bodies:

- The German Government should make BIONET (a platform for exchange and cooperation developed by the German GIZ) functional again, as currently the platform is out of use;
- The Regional Cooperation Council should engage more with CSOs from the region through extensive consultation processes as stated in the Protection of Nature and Biodiversity Action Plan for the implementation of the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans 2021–2030.

CSOs and Think Tanks from the Western Balkans Should:

- Become more proactive in advocating and lobbying for concrete policy changes in the environmental field and position themselves as key partners through the dialogue between the government and the civil society sector;
- Advocate for being included in the initial planning phases (working groups, elaboration of strategies and policy papers) as they are the only actors promoting environmentally friendly policies in the WB6;
- Establish a transparent system owned by local and international NGOs or third and independent parties to monitor the enforcement of local laws and to uncover environmental crimes;

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- Work on raising awareness among the population about the importance of environmental protection in order to reduce the amount of waste and pollution;
 - Increase efforts to build trust among citizens through concrete results which in turn is the only way to motivate them to become involved;
 - Provide expertise and technical input, move agendas forward, and perform the watchdog role to counterbalance the weak public institutions of the WB, thereby helping their own governments, as well as international donors to channel the funding to where it is needed the most;
 - Support and strengthen the cooperation between environmental CSOs in all the WB6 states and build a network to protect the environment and achieve a sustainable use of natural resources;
 - Create a GEO portal with the locations and specifics of each area collecting significant data from air pollution, food and water pollution, illegal landfills to infectious diseases – simply everything that affects the health of citizens. The portal can be used to inform citizens about important developments and the achieved goals in the countries and could allow a comparison of the countries' progress in decreasing all types of pollution. It would furthermore promote the regional cooperation of CSOs.

EU Integration in a Changing Geopolitical Environment

With war raging at its borders, over the last year, the European Union has experienced major challenges both internally and in its neighborhood. At the latest EU Council meeting in June 2022, a major shift in EU foreign policy occurred with the approved candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova. While after a long delay North Macedonia and Albania held the first Intergovernmental Conferences (IGC), no breakthrough on visa liberalization for Kosovo was made. The geopolitical pressure and the expansion of the pool of candidates for accession has reinvigorated the debates as to the much-needed reform of the EU enlargement process. There is significant pressure both from within and outside of the Union to introduce a more dynamic and gradual process of accession. While the merits of the 2020 ‘revised methodology’ have not even been properly tested, bilateral disputes remain, both with EU members and among candidates, in effect stifling regional cooperation. In order to improve the situation, below are listed recommendations for the region’s governments, the EU/EU member states/the international community, and civil society/think tanks from the region.

Western Balkan Governments Should:

- Jointly advocate for setting 2030 as an indicative target date for EU accession of the Western Balkans countries, which would increase the incentives for genuine EU-related reforms in the WB countries, and respecting the merit-based principle;
- Agree on common positions regarding the EU enlargement policy, especially in the context of conflicting messages coming from top EU officials and MS representatives;
- Clearly underline that multiple approaches to EU integration should ensure complementarity, including new initiatives and fora, such as the European Political Community (EPC) and that they cannot be a substitute for EU accession;
- Recognize the geopolitical moment Europe finds itself currently in and work on finding sustainable solutions for pending bilateral issues, based on the genuine and long-term interests of the citizens, avoiding inflammatory and nationalist speech; and manifesting good will for reconciliation and cohesion;
- Show concrete leadership and demonstrate political will to deal with the past and promote reconciliation;
- Grasp the momentum for unambiguous dedication to regional cooperation, based on the progress in the implementation of the Common Regional Market; promote ownership of all regional initiatives in an inclusive manner;
- Align their foreign policy with EU foreign policy including introducing sanctions in line with EU CFSP positions, as part of their EU commitments and as means to build cohesion within the region and Europe;
- Promote cooperation with the new EU candidates and aspiring countries from the Eastern Partnership, fostering dialogue on the EU integration process and sharing experiences and lessons learned;
- Take resolute actions for accelerating the pace of EU-related reforms; end politicization of the institutions and the administration and eliminate clientelism; secure division and balance of powers and ensure independence of the judiciary; guarantee transparency and accountability and ensure that essential public services are improved and equally accessible to all citizens, especially education and health;
- Substantially implement commitments to improving fundamental rights, including rights to persons who belong to minorities, especially of LGBTI persons; prioritize gender mainstreaming in policy making and take decisive action on women’s rights; intensify efforts for Roma inclusion; take resolute actions against hate speech and hate crimes;
- Request substantial support from the EU to mitigate economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine on the local economies and the most vulnerable parts of societies; cooperate and coordinate individual efforts in the spirit of regional solidarity;
- Involve the civil society systematically in all phases of EU accession reforms, with partici-

tion mechanisms which are accessible and based on trust, transparency, and accountability, providing long-term support and dedicated resources; refrain from attacking CSOs for criticizing decisions and policies of EU institutions and of national governments; ensure an enabling environment for the civil society and think tanks to freely and professionally exercise their mandates, without any institutional pressure;

- Build a joint position on accelerated gradual/staged integration, setting priorities for the whole region, based on the interests of the citizens and stimulating convergence of the region with the EU, ensuring freedom of movement and institutional socialization; increase efforts to maximize the benefits from the available modalities of participation;
- Resolutely demand structural investments into the common strategic and critical infrastructure, assisting economic and social convergence with the EU, based on the implementation of EU-related reforms and invest in absorption capacities for using EU funds, identifying and addressing the bottlenecks.

The EU and the International Community Should:

- Recognize that the new geo-political situation created by the Russian aggression on Ukraine requires a major shift in the EU policy towards the Western Balkans, beyond declarations and unfulfilled promises that have led to losing the credibility of the EU in the WB;
- Set 2030 as an indicative target date for EU accession of the WB countries to, which would increase the cost of non-enlargement and non-compliance, accompanied by a clear conditionality framework focused on major political issues and challenges in the region, while respecting the merit-based principle for each country individually;
- Revise the bilaterally imposed conditions by EU MS on WB countries in the accession process, which are undermining EU values and prevent such misuse of the enlargement process in future;
- Prevent further downgrading of democracy, fundamental rights and rule of law principles in assessing the progress of aspiring countries; reject the concept of “stabilitocracy” or any other concept than the objective fulfilment of EU values and standards, pursuing a strict, but consistent conditionality policy;
- Take decisive action in supporting promotion and protection of fundamental rights by conducting comprehensive scrutiny of implementation of policies, especially in the area of women rights, LGBTI, Roma, and regarding persons with disabilities;
- In the follow-up of the Conference on the Future of Europe, acknowledging the strategic importance of the EU’s enlargement, introduce qualified majority voting for enlargement-related decisions in the Council;
- Ensure one voice of the EU, together with its transatlantic partners, on the key issues in the region; prevent politically biased actions of their representatives on the ground, and demonstrate, by example, the implementation of the principles of transparency, accountability and inclusiveness in these actions;
- Ensure that EU accession of the WB countries has no alternatives; existing initiatives and newly established platforms (EPC) should serve exclusively to facilitate the EU accession of the WB countries; equally ensure that modalities for gradual integration accelerate and intensify the EU accession trajectory;
- Consistently include Western Balkan governments in the EU-level response to crises caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine; substantially assist the WB countries to address the consequences of the crises, as well as mitigating the impact of alignment with EU sanctions;
- Ensure long-term support to CSOs focused on increased networking on the national and regional level, as well as with EU member states’ CSOs, monitoring and advocacy and increased involvement of grass-root organizations for a genuine EU-related reform;

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- Demonstrate that the CSOs' contributions in the EU accession process and the Berlin process are valued and followed-up, including through an objective evaluation of the implementation of commitments;
 - Support substantially increased investment in the region to bridge the convergence gap with the EU through more sustained development strategies, preventing further erosion especially of the regions' human capital and consequently of the capacities in the region for growth, as well as for democratic and institutional development.

Civil Society Organizations from the Western Balkans Should:

- Jointly advocate for setting 2030 as an indicative target date for EU accession, as a shared commitment by the EU and the WB countries, based on the individual merits principle;
- Stand for a one-voice approach of the EU, its member states and transatlantic partners, in order to prevent spreading third-party influences in the region, as well as a spreading/spill-over of illiberal tendencies;
- Increase pressure on respective governments to align their positions with the EU positions on the Russian aggression in Ukraine;
- Resolutely demand from EU institutions, member states and national governments in the region to ensure a continuous focus on democracy, rule of law, and human and minority rights, as a fundamental and essential requirement for accession to the EU and prevent obstructing the process from abuse of bilateral issues, identity and history;
- Synchronize efforts at a regional and national level for continuous joint and systematic pressure on governments to end politicization, clientelism, and high-level corruption;
- Further improve systematic, independent monitoring of EU-related reforms in the WB countries, based on quantitative and qualitative indicators, providing comparative and comparable findings, as a ground for joint advocacy on further steps and meritocratic assessment of the implementation of reforms;
- Based on reliable findings from independent monitoring and evaluation, continuously demand transparency and inclusiveness of the EU accession-related reforms and hold governments accountable for their track record;
- Contribute to an objective evaluation of the EU policies towards the region; jointly develop a tool to track recommendations for enhancing EU enlargement policy in order to critically assess the CSOs' role in the process and to push national governments and EU institutions to act upon recommendations;
- Jointly advocate for ensuring effective mechanisms for consultations and involvement of CSOs at a national, regional, and EU level, throughout the whole EU integration process in order to bring back/improve the evidence-based approach to public policy-making;
- Strengthen the structured networking and synergies among the CSOs in the region; embark on effective joint actions with CSOs from the EU; build partnerships and establish networking with the CSOs from the countries of the Eastern Partnership;
- Improve synergies among regional CSO networks and ensure increased involvement of grass-root organizations;
- Demonstrate solidarity within civil society, resolutely defend the right to freedom of expression, including criticizing the EU, as well as national decision makers and policies, and stimulate dialogue based on arguments;
- Jointly advocate and increase pressure for gender mainstreaming of policy-making in the region and implementation of the EU Gender Action plan III.

Information Disorder

The Western Balkan countries suffer from pervasive contamination of the information and media space. Information integrity is jeopardized on all levels, from public broadcasters that are often hostages of political power, to underdeveloped and overcrowded small media markets where commercial outlets are pushed either into political servitude or tabloid-like business models incentivized by large tech platforms. Last but not least, a whole new area of grey economy has grown around the business of click-farms, using sensationalism or falsehoods to bait users on social media and monetize via Google Ads. To address these intertwined problems which contribute to rampant information disorder in the region, cross-sectoral action needs to be taken by all relevant stakeholders, on two basic levels:

1. Building resilience against information disorder (strengthening media and information literacy), and
2. Creating counter-measures to monitor and prevent it.

Western Balkan Governments Should:

- Discontinue practices which jeopardize media freedom, particularly those that target journalists and independent media;
- Provide a thriving legal and political environment for independent media, particularly public broadcasters;
- Strengthen the capacity, independence and accountability of regulatory bodies;
- Foster cross-regional cooperation, initiatives and cross-sector alliances between stakeholders working on media and information literacy, research and anti-disinformation;
- Provide the public with accurate, timely and reliable information by putting forward communicators with expertise and integrity;
- Pay special attention to using fact-based information about sensitive topics that are likely to be target of disinformation;
- Make media and information literacy (MIL) a part of the curriculum in formal education from the youngest age (kindergarten, primary and secondary schools);

- Support informal MIL education for all generations;
- Adopt good practices in MIL programs catered to specific audiences and demographic groups;
- Proactively engage relevant public institutions in meaningful and functional cross-sector coalitions to create a more systematic approach to MIL;
- Create preventive information campaigns against information disorder in crises such as the pandemic or in cases of foreign malign influence operations;
- Withdraw public funding from media which engage in spreading disinformation and do not adhere to ethical practices and professional standards. Promote the same policies with other stakeholders such as businesses and tech companies;
- Follow EU policies in the fight against disinformation: align with EU practice and consider limiting the reach and influence of malign/propaganda outlets of foreign governments;
- Help adjust regulation, co-regulation and self-regulation mechanisms against information disorder based on prolonged detailed discussions of all relevant stakeholders across sectors. In the process, pay special attention to the paramount balance between media freedom and anti-disinformation policies.

The EU and the International Community Should:

- Place media freedom high on the list of priorities for Western Balkan countries in the EU integrations process. Include this topic in the Berlin Process as an initiative for the governments of the Western Balkan Six countries (WB6) to sign a commitment to implement recommendations related to media freedom;
- Transfer knowledge and skills from member states with advanced media literacy and anti-disinformation practices, including the following steps:
 - Design an European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) counterpart – Democracy Action Plan for the WB6;

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- Enable timely preparation for introduction and implementation of the Digital Services Act in the WB6;
 - Help prepare the region to harmonize with the Digital Services Act;
 - Offer WB stakeholders to observe the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA) and European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO);
- Communicate the information integrity needs of WB6 countries and languages with very large on-line platforms;
 - Influence the platforms to support quality journalism and discourage publishing of misinformation in the regional WB6 markets;
 - Advocate for very large online platforms to widen the scope of the strengthened Code of Practice against Disinformation to include the WB6 and to adopt the same practices in the Western Balkan countries as in the European Union:
 - Proactively implement the strengthened Code of Practice Against Disinformation, including cooperation with fact-checkers;
 - Improve screening processes for advertisers and political ads and release detailed transparency reports for political advertisement;
 - Improve content moderation systems to make reporting unacceptable actors more meaningful and efficient;
 - Do their due diligence in the region: employ more context-aware, local and native speakers when developing and implementing policies in the region;
 - De-incentivize business models based on false information and false advertisements;
 - Make state efforts in fighting disinformation a criterion when assessing progress in media freedom within the EU accession (Chapters 23 and 24; Chapter 10 on Information Society and Media);
 - Design new instruments to monitor and assess media freedom, such as special reports on progress in criteria related to media freedom;
- Enable funding of media and journalism collaboration, cooperation and networking independent of the EU member status:
 - Support links between media and civil society, as well as regional media cooperation in fighting disinformation;
 - Support networks and alliances between regulatory bodies, CSOs, media institutes/centers and other stakeholders engaged in MIL and fighting disinformation;
 - Improve coordination between donors of civil society in the WB6 to maximize impact and avoid inefficient use of resources in these areas;
 - Withdraw funding from media which engage in spreading disinformation and do not adhere to ethical practices and professional standards;
 - Provide more funding for tackling disinformation campaigns in the region. Offer local/regional NGOs a platform to learn more about deterring malign Russian influence and adopt good practices already established in EU member states.
- Civil Society and Think Tanks Should:**
- Initiate a broad discussion on standards for media credibility, drawing on existing mechanisms such as Journalism Trust Initiative’s self-evaluation, journalistic codes of conduct, professional standards, regulatory acts, and fact-checking records;
 - Promote credibility criteria as basis for governments, tech companies and businesses to direct advertising and public funding;
 - Build coalitions for sharing experiences and research on MIL and anti-disinformation policies. Connect with existing coalitions on EU and Council of Europe level to strengthen research on good practices and stakeholders, provide toolkits and educational materials;
 - Conduct educational campaigns on MIL and anti-disinformation policies;
 - Organize tailored MIL campaigns, workshops and similar efforts for vulnerable groups like children, teenagers or the elderly employing the media/channels of communication they use to access information;

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- Engage with EDMO and other relevant anti-disinformation researchers to include the WB6 in research and monitoring, both on the country- and language-level;
 - Include relevant information in monitoring mechanisms, such as Media Pluralism Monitor and pre-accession annual reports;
 - Conduct permanent media monitoring to detect the media spreading disinformation thereby creating a “credibility index”;
 - Organize and join advocacy campaigns to raise awareness on mechanisms of spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories, particularly on social media. Pay special attention to radicalizing narratives stemming from malign propaganda and conspiracy theories;
 - Conduct social media research which can help in identifying the patterns of the spread of various types of information disorder online. Tailor the public communication to specific social groups when presenting results of such research;
 - Target specific groups when trying to warn of the dangers of social media misinformation, malign propaganda and conspiracy theories;
 - Develop toolkits with proven good practices on MIL and support educational institutions working with young people in the use of those tools;
 - Support and introduce fact-checking services in all relevant news media production flows;
 - Include more media and disinformation-related topics when developing youth exchange programs and non-formal education events in the region;
 - Communicate the local information needs with very large online platforms;
 - Influence online platforms to support quality journalism and discourage publishing of misinformation in the regional markets;
 - Play a watchdog role in ensuring the balance of media freedom and anti-disinformation actions in any processes related to regulatory policies.

Infrastructure Investments

The input from specialized CSOs and think tanks is a valuable tool for the EU and international financial institutions (IFIs) engaged in infrastructure support in the Western Balkans, especially in the phases of infrastructure project identification and prioritization. Without going into the very technical details of any project (being it in transport, energy, digital, etc.) CSOs and think tanks should be consulted on what kind of infrastructure the region and a selected country need, what the budgetary constraints are and which project is a citizen priority. To ensure full compliance of those projects with EU values, specialized CSOs and think tanks should become an integral part of their integrity compliance monitoring mechanisms.

The EU Should:

- Include CSOs in the following Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) informal Working Groups: ii) Implementation of the Green Agenda, and iv) Effective capital investment, planning and implementation;
- Include CSO representatives in the semi-annual pipeline review meetings, mid-term review and continuous consultation between the various stakeholders involved;
- Initiate and support consultations with CSOs on issues regarding compatibility of European Investment Plan (EIP) flagships with Common Regional Market (CRM) policy measures and the Green Agenda;
- Include specialized CSOs in Terms of References (TORs) prepared by the WBIF and / or Infrastructure Project Facility (IPF) for any consortium and invite them to participate in all infrastructure project phases (from identification to handover). In particular, specialized CSOs should be contracted to monitor integrity compliance in each infrastructure project;
- Prioritize the national level public infrastructure management reform as one of the key aspects of public finance management reform processes in the countries of the region, promote its importance in the enlargement strategy, as well as insist on the greater inclusion of civil society in the process.

Western Balkan Countries Should:

- Intensify reforms in the area of public infrastructure management, including the components of accountability, transparency and participatory approaches for inclusion of the civil society;
- Introduce participation of relevant CSOs in the National Investment Committees;
- Establish a proactive obligatory semestral publication of the National Single Project Pipeline;
- Conduct CSO consultations on selected strategic projects. The CSO consultation criteria should be based on resilience and good governance indicators. Involvement of CSOs in all projects that touch upon energy security and / or Green Agenda should be the starting point.

CSOs from the Western Balkans Should:

- Demand a high level of proactive transparency from both the national governments and the WBIF about the public infrastructure projects and both project pipelines;
- Network and connect regionally to share experiences and set up knowledge hubs on participating in the public infrastructure investments, from planning to audit;
- Make use of reports such as the IMF's Public Infrastructure Management Assessments to advocate for reforms in this area and raise awareness about their findings and the impact of registered problems among the public.



Conference Report

Panel 1: Energy Transition and Energy Security in a Time of Crises

Rapporteur from Civil Society:

Jovan Rajić

Chairman of the Board, Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute (RERI), Belgrade

Commentators:

Christiane Hullmann

Head of Division 209 Western Balkans, German Federal Foreign Office, Berlin

Dirk Buschle

Deputy Director, Energy Community Secretariat, Vienna (online)

Sonja Risteska

Program Manager, Powering Past Coal Alliance (PPCA), Berlin

Andreas Chollet

WPD Eastern Europe GmbH, Stuttgart (online)

Chair:

Selma Šehović

Project Manager, Energy Transition and Climate Change Policies in Southeastern Europe, Friedrich Ebert Foundation Regional Dialogue SOE, Sarajevo



Presenting the results and recommendations from the working group, Jovan Rajić stated that basically there is no energy transition in the WB but it had only just begun which was due to a lack of strategy and political will among decision makers as well as to the absence of a comprehensive approach: The energy transition would transform the overall economic system, and this was slowing down the process. Disagreements among the civil society workshop participants were related to the specific approach to steering the energy transition, especially concerning the role of the state versus the role of the market. What was important according to Rajić was the inclusion of all stakeholders, i.e., trade unions, CSOs, and experts. None of them should be

seen as opponents of the state. Moreover, Rajić said that there was a need for more transparency and rule of law in the process of energy transition, especially regarding public procurement. Additionally, Rajić noted that more platforms for meaningful conversations at eye level about this process were necessary.

A video by *Deutsche Welle* presented the great potential that existed in the WB regarding green energy (sunshine, wind, biomass) – “Just by harnessing wind and sun energy, SEE countries could produce three times more energy than they consume.” – and pointed out how the transition towards this type of energy was often hampered by an unpreparedness of local administrations and bad governance. Meanwhile, according to the video, most energy in the WB today comes from old coal-fired power plants, causing the worst air quality in Europe and 30,000 premature deaths per year.

Dirk Buschle agreed with most of the recommendations put forward by civil society but affirmed the role of the market and that this did not mean releasing local governments from responsibility but “quite the contrary”. In this vein, Buschle remarked that WB markets needed to be integrated more into the EU’s common market and that a price reform was needed to create greater incentives to save energy on the one hand and to invest in renewables on the other. Prices had to become more reflective of the costs, and investors needed to be able to see returns, Buschle stressed. Therefore, carbon emis-

sions should be priced more. He also pointed out that more regionalization in energy transition was needed, with joint regional planning rather than state-level action, especially regarding “the painful decision” of phasing out coal. Finally, WB countries should take their commitments more seriously: The energy transition had to be faster, fairer, and more controlled. Christiane Hullmann stated that she could also very much subscribe to the recommendations and vividly agreed that WB governments should live up to their commitments more. Hullmann also pointed out that Germany was strongly increasing its efforts to support the energy transition of the WB so Germany could become independent of Russian gas, that the WB could become an exporter of green energy and that this great potential had to be used. Also, the energy transition would provide a lot of jobs for the WB: “There’s no shortage of money for green energy projects but a good framework is needed, and investors need security”. Apparently, WB politicians were aware of all this, but they lacked initiative and were facing diverging local interests. Sonja Risteska likewise emphasized that the biggest problem in implementing the WB’s energy transition was that investment in the WB was seen as risky and that more security for investors was needed. Andreas Chollet, meanwhile, fully agreed that regionalization of the WB markets was needed to foster investment in the local energy transition; coal should no longer have “an economic advantage.”

One participant from the audience disagreed that coal was still used in the region for economic reasons, arguing that many WB countries were already importing it. In her view, the true reason was simply path dependency. Another participant emphasized the relevance of civil society in bringing together the supporters and opponents of the energy transition as well as representatives of the governments and businesses. More direct contact with businesses was needed. Buschle agreed and was optimistic that renewable energy production would soon be economically attractive for businesses: “a coal renaissance is unlikely.” Hullmann, meanwhile, recognized the challenges for WB administrations in

adapting and building new capacities – but if the political will was sufficient, help would be available, for example, from GIZ.



Panel 2: Climate Change and Environmentally Sustainable Development

Rapporteurs from Civil Society:

Rinora Gojani

Programs and Operations Manager,
Balkan Green Foundation (BGF), Pristina

Endri Haxhiraj

Director, Institute for Environmental Policy (IEP),
Tirana

Commentators:

H.E. Almira Xhembulla

Deputy Minister, Ministry of Tourism and
Environment, Republic of Albania, Tirana (online)

Teodora Grncarovska

State Counselor on Climate Change,
Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning
(MoEPP), Republic of North Macedonia,
Skopje (online)

Stefan Mager

Program Manager Waste and Circular Economy,
Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), Pristina

Ifeta Smajic

Social Development Specialist,
World Bank, Berlin

Frosina Antonovska

Energy and Climate Policy Officer for
Western Balkans, Climate Action Network (CAN)
Europe, Brussels (online)

Chair:

Katja Giebel

Senior Program Officer, Heinrich Böll Foundation,
Berlin



civil society found that cooperation between governments, CSOs, and experts should be enhanced; CSOs should collaborate more and strive for more involvement in the decision-making process whilst corruption had to be fought, laws had to be implemented more rigorously, and local administrations' capacities had to be further developed. These structural changes were as crucial in moving towards a more sustainable development as supporting a green agriculture or reforestation and that people needed opportunities to conserve or improve their living conditions in the transition towards a more environmentally friendly economy, otherwise it would fail. Finally, Haxhiraj called upon external actors (such as the EU) to collaborate more with CSOs instead of with governments.

In response, H.E. Deputy Minister Xhembulla pointed out how much the Albanian government was already involving CSOs in their consultation processes. She emphasized that CSOs played a crucial role in Albania's strategy for more sustainable development. Asked whether the construction of the new Vloa Airport was not in contradiction with environmental protection regulations, the Deputy Minister argued that the government had consulted various stakeholders and, as a result, the area where the airport was being built had been removed from the list of protected territory. As Xhembulla remarked however, the construction was still being monitored by the Ministry of Tourism and Environment and various steps to preserve the ecology of the area were being taken. That said, the impor-

Presenting the recommendations of his working group, Endri Haxhiraj particularly emphasized the role of state structures in fostering environmentally sustainable development in the Western Balkans. Similarly to the previous panel, representatives from

tance of the airport for tourism in Albania should not be underestimated in the view of H.E. Deputy Minister Xhembulla, which justified this final decision. Teodora Grncarovska meanwhile stressed that instead of exclusively blaming the government for not involving them more in the policymaking process, CSOs themselves should cooperate more with each other and become more transparent about how they work.

Rinora Gojani, the second rapporteur from civil society, underlined the link between state institutions, private businesses and individuals in becoming more sustainable. One example she mentioned was the funding of and investment in railway companies as well as the provision of grants and subsidies for private households to make their property more environmentally friendly. Another crucial example was the recycling and waste management sector, where Germany was a role model and more expertise should be harnessed from German organizations such as GIZ, Gojani said. Similarly, more data should be collected on climate change but also on the progress made by institutions in preventing it. Finally, according to Gojani, in this overall societal transformation, the role of women was vital.

For Stefan Mager, another essential aspect of sustainable development was a thorough discussion on the regions' industrial future: tourism and the environment were often in conflict at first sight and many people were afraid of a greener economy because it connoted job loss and higher living costs for them. These concerns had to be addressed and, in this vein, Mager critically remarked that local CSOs, in his view, were too often driven primarily by the values of their donors and insufficiently connected to wider society and average citizens. Likewise, Frosina Antonovska said that CSOs spent too much time speaking to each other and too little connecting to and convincing citizens. As an example, she presented a comic series called *Energy Superheroes* developed by her organization to reach wider society and educate about sustainable development more effectively. In this context, Antonovska

stressed that both traditional and social media were important for messages to gain traction.

Finally, Ifeta Smajić addressed the connection of sustainable development, or rather the lack thereof, with the emigration of citizens. What was most needed in this regard, in her view, was a facilitation of dialogue between governments and citizens in the WB. This was what CSOs should focus on. This opinion was also shared by a member of the audience who emphasized the current distance and lack of communication between political representatives and citizens in the WB. All this further underlined the importance of institutions, participatory democracy, and addressing citizens' economic worries about the future for achieving sustainable development in the WB, as stated in the recommendations. On this note, Stefan Mager concluded that "green topics" were still "luxury topics" in the WB and, therefore, governments were not allocating budgets to sustainable development and climate change yet.



Panel 3: Information Disorder in the Western Balkans

Rapporteur from Civil Society:

Tijana Cvjetičanin

Editor-in-chief, Raskrinkavanje, Sarajevo

Commentators:

Jasna Jelišić

*Head of Western Balkans Task Force,
Strategic Communications and Information Analysis,
European External Action Service (EEAS), Brussels*

Adelheid Feilcke

*Director of Programs for Europe,
Deutsche Welle (DW), Bonn*

Armela Krasniqi

*Chairwoman, Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA),
Tirana*

Zoran Trajchevski

*Director, Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media,
Skopje*

Chair:

Katharina Naumann

*Coordinator International Media Programs,
Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Berlin*



content and thereby facilitated the spread of fake news, as it could be declared as advertising and thus become even less identifiable.

One project Cvjetičanin cited as an example for trying to battle these tendencies and raise citizens' capacities in critically dealing with the media was *Strengthening Quality News and Independent Journalism in the Western Balkans and Turkey*, implemented by BIRN together with various partners.

Jasna Jelišić drew attention to the role of foreign involvement in creating disinformation whilst also discussing the difference between disinformation, which is done with the strategic aim of spreading false information, and misinformation, which has similar effects but is created without ill intentions. Since both existed, citizens' awareness was all the more important and journalists' responsibility was especially high. In her view, it was time to move from diagnosing the situation to taking more effective action. Here, she concurred with Cvjetičanin in that a freer environment for media-oriented civil society organizations and critical quality journalism had to be created first. To tackle misinformation, more independent and investigative quality journalism was needed. On this note, Adelheid Feilcke raised the underlying question of what quality journalism really was, making the point that this often was not clear to media consumers in the WB: Sources of information were very diverse today, which made it harder for journalists to even reach citizens, especially the young. According to Feilcke, this resulted in very

Introducing her working group's recommendations, Tijana Cvjetičanin prefaced her remarks with the comment that, besides disinformation and fake news, an even more fundamental problem in the WB regarding the production and consumption of news was the lack of real freedom of the media and the constant pressure from the side of governments. This curtailed many journalists in their work, both in terms of providing news themselves and reacting to news that was identified as fake. Cvjetičanin pointed out that next to enhancing media freedom, the other vital need in the WB was to educate citizens about the existence of fake news, how it was produced, and how important it was to check its validity. Current internet regulations in many WB countries were not helpful in this regard, as they made it easy for commercial content to be side by side with news

diverse attitudes to media outlets and sources of information among citizens, where general skepticism was high. Still, many people fell prey to sensationalism and false content due to lacking “media literacy”. Local fact-checking institutions should therefore join forces.

Another topic mentioned was the notion of “constructive journalism”, which refers not only to reporting on issues in the region but also to discussing possible solutions, for example, regarding mass emigration. This could make traditional media more attractive again and steer young people away from fake news outlets. Such outlets, Armela Krasniqi added, often had their roots in Russia, which made the problem of disinformation especially touchy. She also highlighted the link between disinformation and the spread of conspiracy theories, underlining that her agency was independent of the government and essential in upholding ethical codes in broadcasting in Albania. In reaction to the discussion, one member of the audience critically noted the growing occurrence and influence of fake news also within the EU, as could be seen in the context of Russia’s war against Ukraine. This made her wonder if EU member states really could serve as a role model for the WB in this regard, considering European integration and the requirements the WB countries were trying to fulfil to join the EU. Likewise, another member of the audience added that some WB countries, such as Serbia, had more fact-checking organizations than some EU member states, such as Greece, for example. In response, Jasna Jelišić argued that there was less “analytical journalism” in the WB than anywhere else in Europe. In her view, the reason for this was that the demand for it had decreased while the demand for “entertainment journalism” was on the rise. In contrast, Adelheid Feilcke was of the opinion that there was “too much” so-called analytical journalism and that, as a result, opinions could no longer be distinguished from facts and pure information. On this note, Armela Krasniqi accentuated how crucial it was, besides fighting misinformation, to generate and maintain trust in the media as such.



Spotlight 1: Dealing with the Past and Reconciliation Efforts in the Western Balkans

Nataša Kandić

*Founder, Humanitarian Law Centre (HLC),
Belgrade*

Kushtrim Koliqi

Executive Director, NGO Integra, Pristina

Branka Vierda

*Program Director, Youth Initiative for Human Rights
(YIHR) Croatia, Zagreb (online)*

Jasmin Hasić

*Executive Director of Humanity in Action,
Sarajevo*

Chair:

Johanna Deimel

*Independent Analyst Southeast Europe/Balkans,
Munich*

Nataša Kandić agreed with Minister Baerbock's opening words in saying that "reconciliation takes time" and pointed out that the WB were very far from reconciliation because there were no politicians ready for it yet. Moreover, reconciliation could not be taught by foreigners; it had to come from among the people concerned. Moreover, for real reconciliation, social justice and the recognition of past suffering were necessary. As a result, what was most needed in her view were "the right conditions for reconciliation": naming victims and missing persons, and building more links between civil societies. This was what European institutions should push for. For Branka Vierda, reconciliation between the people of the WB was closely linked to integrating the whole region into the EU eventually. Currently, national



school curricula and textbooks were perpetuating rather than challenging interethnic hostility and segregation. Jasmin Hasić likewise put an emphasis on the WB youth and on changing the education system: WB youngsters should be raised to be critical of their own democracies and representatives rather than be socialized into hating each other. Kushtrim Koliqi agreed that the lack of data on victims and missing persons was a major barrier to reaching reconciliation because it inhibited an evidence-based way of dealing with the past. Artists were helping to deal with feelings about the past, but too often their output was influenced by dogma. Also, minorities such as the Roma were often forgotten in discussions about reconciliation, as if they were "just a decorative element" of building peaceful co-existence in the WB. At this point, one member of the audience illustrated how the Roma were, for example, entirely dismissed from Kosovo's nation-building process, stating that they were seen as related to the Serbs and therefore not even deserving of integration, which meant that the past injustices they had suffered were not being addressed. No reconciliation could be achieved as long as any group was being excluded, the speaker stressed.



Spotlight 2: Amplifying Roma Voices in Policy-Making

Dejan Marković

Forum Roma of Serbia, Belgrade

Adriatik Hasantari

Roma Active Albania (RAA), Tirana

Aleksandra Bojadjeva

*Roma Policy Expert,
Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Belgrade*

Sonja Licht

*President, Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence
(BFPE), Belgrade (online)*

Elvis Memeti

*National Roma Contact Point within the Cabinet of
the Prime Minister, Government of the Republic of
North Macedonia, Skopje (online)*

Chair:

Gilda-Nancy Horvath,

Journalist and Transdisciplinary Creator, Vienna

Introducing the panel, moderator Gilda-Nancy Horvath underlined how narratives were shaping perceptions of social reality, which especially applied to the issue of the Roma. Along those lines, Sonja Licht made the point that integrating the WB countries into the EU should also imply integrating the Roma fully into WB societies and the European imaginary. One concrete step towards this integration was providing them with more opportunities to become entrepreneurs, given how difficult it could be for them to find employment. Presenting statistics on Romanies' living conditions, Dejan Marković



argued that despite all inclusion programs, many Roma were still far from living like average citizens in the WB. This was also due to antiziganism still being widespread: “Some schools don’t even allow Roma children in.” As Marković stressed, participation did not always equal equitable decision-making: some Roma were “just there.” Or as Gilda-Nancy Horvath put it, agreeing with Marković: “Inviting somebody doesn’t mean that we also give them the power to participate in the decision-making.” More equitable power-sharing was needed. In the same vein, Adriatik Hasantari explained how Roma were often treated as second-class citizens, whose issues were to be addressed after other citizens’ problems had been solved. Aleksandra Bojadjeva agreed that antiziganism was a crucial issue in the WB; more “mainstream Roma” had to be included and thereby become visible in all sorts of political processes, not just those directly linked to Roma issues. Elvis Memeti, meanwhile, underlined that also Romany people’s trust in the political system had to be restored to foster their active participation. This included stopping politicians from buying poor Romanies’ votes whilst otherwise ignoring them.



Spotlight 3: Promoting Rule of Law and Fighting Corruption

H.E. Kreshnik Ahmeti

*Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora of
the Republic of Kosovo*

Viola von Cramon-Taubadel

*Member of the European Parliament,
Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance*

Srđan Blagovčanin

*Chairman of the Board of Directors,
Transparency International BiH, Sarajevo*

Srđan Majstorović

*Chairman of the Governing Board,
European Policy Centre (CEP), Belgrade*

Chair:

Wouter Zweers

Research Fellow, Clingendael Institute, The Hague

H.E. Deputy Minister Ahmeti stated that his government's program was essentially based on what they called "the two J's: jobs and justice." Both dealing with the wrongdoings of the past and fighting corruption in the present were important to building an environment in which the economy could grow. Backing this up, he added that Kosovo had moved up in international rankings of freedom of press and announced that new vetting measures were going to be introduced to reform and strengthen the justice system. For Viola von Cramon-Taubadel, rule of law was a central pillar of any EU accession process



and unfortunately sometimes overseen when foreign policy issues were being prioritized. In her view, Kosovo had shown how much a country could change when the political will was sufficient and rule of law was a priority. She also underscored that reforms had to be implemented and not only exist on paper. In the same vein, Srđan Blagovčanin argued that there had been very little progress in terms of rule of law in the region overall: "There have been reforms and there are now institutions, but there are no results." Too often, there was no clear boundary between the judiciary and mafia-like structures. Therefore, the overall approach had to be changed. Srđan Majstorović added that corruption and the absence of full-fledged rule of law were also key drivers of many people's emigration from the region. If these issues were not solved in the future, people from the WB would continue migrating to the EU. The panel concluded that investing in democracy in the WB meant investing in Europe's security, too.



Spotlight 4: Regional Economic Cooperation in the WB – Where Do We Stand?

Alexander Wallau

Head of Division 212 Bilateral Relations with the Countries of Central, Southeastern and Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia, German Federal Chancellery, Berlin (online)

Pranvera Kastrati

CRM Coordinator, Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Tirana

Nenad Đurđević

Adviser to the President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia, Belgrade (online)

Jelica Minić

President, European Movement in Serbia (EMinS), Belgrade

Silvana Mojsavska

Institute of Economics, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje

Chair:

Valbona Zeneli

Chair of the Strategic Initiatives Department, College of International and Security Studies, George C. Marshall Center, Garmisch-Partenkirchen

According to Alexander Wallau, there was reason to remain skeptical of major breakthroughs in the Berlin Process in the near future, yet one should recognize and value the small achievements of the past, such as the abolition of roaming charges in the region. Moreover, it was key to see the potential for progress in the region such as greater regional co-



operation in the energy sector. As a result, he was hopeful for small-step improvements and emphasized Chancellor Scholz's willingness to push for such. Pranvera Kastrati agreed that small-step improvements were essential to keeping up citizens' trust in the accession process, as it showed tangible effects. However, she critically remarked that such improvements only happened when the political will was sufficient in both the WB and the EU, which made the actualization of such improvements very volatile. Commenting from the viewpoint of private businesses, Nenad Đurđević noted that there was a need for institutions to facilitate regional economic cooperation; for example, more authority should be given to local governments. Secondly, like Ukraine, the countries of the WB should receive access to the EU's single market. Jelica Minić reminded the panel of how many people in the WB had at first feared the Open Balkans Initiative and the common regional market as a substitute for full EU integration, despite its benefits. Regional initiatives "bought time" in the long accession process but they had to be well promoted. For Silvana Mojsavska, enhancing regional economic cooperation was all about having external support.



Panel 4: Ensuring Sustainable and Resilient Infrastructure Investments

Rapporteurs from Civil Society:

Marko Sošić

Researcher, Institute Alternative (IA), Podgorica

Ardian Hackaj

Research Director and Coordinator of Tirana Connectivity Forum, Cooperation and Development Institute (CDI), Tirana

Commentators:

H.E. Jovana Marović

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of EU Affairs, Montenegro (online)

Ary Naïm

Regional Manager, Central & Southeast Europe, International Finance Corporation (IFC), Belgrade (online)

Nedim Begović

Green/Multimodal/Innovative Transport Solutions Desk Officer, Transport Community, Belgrade (online)

Chair:

Branimir Jovanović

Economist, Vienna for International Economic Studies (wiiw), Vienna

Summarizing the recommendations and proceedings of the thematic working group, Marko Sošić stated that a simple increase in investment in the infrastructure had crystallized as the biggest need. Ardian Hackaj added that another central element was the stability of institutions: rigorous rule of law and a stable government were not exclusive to each other in the WB but they came together in good governance and that was what was needed. External experts from civil society were crucial in this context: they were not elected and hence had no democratic legitimacy on the basis of which they could demand to be listened to by politicians, so they should not complain; however, they had valuable knowledge and international connections that were useful for



politicians to realize infrastructure projects, which would ultimately result in their advice being sought. H.E. Minister Jovana Marović agreed with this viewpoint, emphasizing her openness to advice from civil society.

For Ary Naïm, meanwhile, making the region more attractive for foreign investors should be at the top of the region's agenda, and investing in infrastructure was essential in realizing this. The region had to create better conditions for foreign investors through own public investment but also through more accountability in government and the mitigation of risks that foreign investors would face. In his view, public private partnerships could be a useful tool to boost infrastructure investments. Discussing the state of transport and mobility in the region, Nedim Begović highlighted how the physical infrastructure was directly linked to issues of social justice and less carbon emissions as well.

In reaction to the panel discussion, one member of the audience argued that prior to improving the transport infrastructure for travelers and building high-speed trains, for example, the focus should be put on the already existing railways and on making them more conducive to cargo shipments. The speaker pointed out that cargo typically contributed more to transportation companies' revenues and was therefore better and easier to start with. As a result, the ensuing discussion centered around the question of whether goods or people should be prioritized in developing the infrastructure, how the

infrastructure should ideally be designed in this regard, and which investments were most urgently needed. Independently of this question, Ary Naïm pinpointed the “huge need” to invest as such if the region wanted to become fit for the future. H.E. Minister Marović meanwhile noted that civil society could make a very valuable contribution to this discussion. Sošić and Hackaj added that another challenge was that the current legal framework made investing in infrastructure complicated and untransparent with regard to tenders, donors, and contracting partners. In conclusion, CSOs’ role in publicly monitoring investments in infrastructure and processes of public procurement was highlighted.

Panel 5: EU Integration in a Changing Geopolitical Environment



Rapporteur from Civil Society:

Simonida Kacarska

Director, European Policy Institute (EPI), Skopje

Commentators:

Amb. Frédéric Mondoloni

*Director for Central Europe,
French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paris (online)*

Manuel Sarrazin

*German Federal Government Special Representative
for the Countries of the Western Balkans, Berlin*

Albert Hani

*Secretary General, Regional Youth
Cooperation Office (RYCO), Tirana*

Jana Juzová

*Senior Research Fellow and Head of the
Global Europe Program, EUROPEUM Institute for
European Policy, Prague*

Chairs:

Stormy-Annika Mildner

*Executive Director, Aspen Institute Germany,
Berlin*

Christian Hagemann

*Executive Director, Southeast Europe Association,
Munich*



Reporting on the current view of the Balkan youth on the EU enlargement process, Albert Hani affirmed that there was no enlargement fatigue among the young but, on the contrary, especially now, they wanted EU accession for their countries more than ever. As an analyst at a think tank, Jana Juzová sees her role first and foremost in overseeing how well the WB countries were doing with regard to the fulfilment of the *acquis* criteria and, therefore, is a defendant of a strict conditionality and a critic of the democratic backsliding in the WB. However, she did express concerns about the WB countries becoming disillusioned with the process and, especially given liberal democratic and other shortcomings in various EU member states themselves, raised the question of whether the WB countries could not maybe also be admitted in an imperfect shape in order not to lose them.

Ambassador Frédéric Mondoloni recognized the criticism and vowed that strengthening the credibility of the accession process was important. Having said that, he intended to “make it crystal clear” that the new discussion forum launched by France under the name of a European Political Community was not meant as an alternative to EU accession for the WB but was conceived as a forum to discuss important Europe-wide topics in the here and now, such as Russia’s war on Ukraine. He also announced that France was open to amending its position on visa liberalization for Kosovo but it remained skeptical of enlargement at this point. In response, Manuel Sarrazin expressed that to deepen and solidify the EU, as demanded by France, its institutions should be

Outlining the recommendations of her working group, Simonida Kacarska told the audience how the 24th of February 2022 had changed many WB countries’ relation to the EU: On the one hand, accession became even more desirable, but on the other, the WB were watching the EU’s approach to Ukraine closely and worried to be disadvantaged. Addressing the argument of the EU’s absorption capacity, she stressed that if actual integration was postponed, there had to be other benefits prior to it to keep up the WB countries’ motivation for reform. In this regard, she also raised the topic of determining a date for potential accession – a highly contentious issue within her working group.

strengthened, in particular, the European Court of Justice. Likewise, adopting qualified majority voting for the EU made sense with regard to some issue areas but less so for others. In his view, the biggest weakness of the enlargement process in the past years was that there had been too much focus on discussing potential dates for accession and on the question of whether such a date should be discussed at all. Rather, the aim should be to deliver and focus on actions, i.e., on tangible progress in the WB and on tangible benefits for them provided by the EU. On this note, Manuel Sarrazin saluted the civil society in the WB for their perseverance. From his perspective, this year's Berlin Process Summit, which would take place the following day, could be deemed successful even if it reached only 30% of its ambitious goals: "Nobody expected us to get all WB 6 into the EU in one go."

Reacting to widespread concerns in the region that additional formats, such as the European Political Community or the Berlin Process, could replace the enlargement process, Juzová argued that these fears were due to the fact that the goal of the enlargement process was no longer clear and had to be clarified for the process to remain effective. For her, "staged integration" was the ideal way forward, as it was both in the interest of the EU to keep the WB close and in the interest of the WB to at least come some steps closer to the EU. To achieve this, more EU member states – especially other "friends of the WB" – should be involved in the process. In a similar vein, Hani reminded the discussants that if the WB did not eventually integrate the EU as countries, their citizens were going to try to integrate the EU as individuals by migrating west. Therefore, keeping up hope in the region was paramount, also because it was the hope and enthusiasm of the youth that was driving politicians and businesspeople in the region to keep making an effort at improving their countries' situation. The youth's importance for change in the region was also underlined by Jasna Jelišić, who commented in private capacity that many of even the most committed and motivated young people in the WB were contemplating moving abroad rather than continuing to hope for a

better future in their home country. In conclusion, the panel agreed that restoring trust in the Berlin Process and a renewal of will among WB politicians were key.



GREEN AGENDA

Energy Transition

- EU and the Energy Community should **hold WB governments responsible** for breaching obligations undertaken
- WB governments should commence with the energy transition process
- Develop and **take a regional approach**

Environmental Protection

TO WESTERN BALKAN GOVERNMENTS:

- Build capacities to **investigate environmental crimes**
- Seek NGO input in all decisions on nature conservation and biodiversity

TO THE EU:

- **Pressure the WB6 to implement the Green Agenda** as well as biodiversity, nature, and anti-pollution legislation

Climate Change

- WB governments should **increase climate financing**
- CSOs should expose political and economic actors to their legal and social responsibility towards climate
- **The EU should increase support, technical assistance, and knowledge transfers for a just energy transition**

Information Disorder

- **Prioritize ending media capture** in WB6 as part of EU integration process
- Prioritize media, information and digital literacy in education
- Encourage implementation of the strengthened **Code of Practice Against Disinformation in the WB6**

EU Integration

TO WESTERN BALKAN GOVERNMENTS:

- Advocate for **2030 as a joint target year for EU accession**
- Work on sustainable, citizen-focused solutions for bilateral issues

TO THE EU AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

- EU enlargement policy should **prioritize fundamental rights, democracy and rule of law**

Infrastructure Investments

- Infrastructure projects must ensure **civil society engagement from identification to audit**
- Specialized CSOs should monitor infrastr. project integrity compliance
- **Open up the WBIF** to WB6 citizen representatives; CSOs should enjoy the same rights as WB6 businesses

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