

Balkan Think Tanks Convention III

“Furthering Cooperation under Geopolitical Challenges”

November 7-9, 2022
Ankara

SUMMARY REPORT

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Introduction

Balkan Think Tanks Convention is a gathering of think tanks focusing on political research. The convention aims to enhance dialogue and cooperation among think tanks in the Balkans and Türkiye, develop a regional perspective in understanding and tackling common challenges, and discuss innovative ideas for region-wide policy outcomes. The event is led by the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), a leading think tank in Türkiye, and supported by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB).

The first edition of the Balkan Think Tanks Convention took place in Ankara on 10-12 June 2015, with 30 think tanks and research institutions from twelve countries participating. The second edition was organized on 3-4 November 2016 in Pristina, in partnership with the Democracy for Development Institute (D4D), a Pristina-based think tank. Attended by 27 institutions from twelve countries, the general theme of the second edition was “The Renewed Strategic Importance of the Balkans”.

The third edition of the Balkan Think Tanks Convention was held in Ankara on 7-9 September 2022. The event, organized under the title “Furthering Cooperation under Geopolitical Challenges”, brought together around 40 experts affiliated with 32 institutions from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Türkiye. The Convention included a two-day-long workshop on the common political agenda of the region. The current trends and challenges facing the Balkans, the strategies and orientations of the Balkan countries, and external factors and developments influencing the region were discussed in six roundtable sessions. The sessions on the first day focused on ongoing and potential challenges to order, security, and peace in the Balkans, while the discussions on the second day focused on how to cope with challenges and develop further cooperation in the region. Each session included four interventions followed by an open roundtable discussion. The roundtable sessions covered the following themes:

- 1) Transformation of global geopolitics: How to understand its impacts on the region
- 2) Major political problems in the Balkans: How to evaluate the risks
- 3) EU integration as a never-ending story: How to make sense of deadlocks
- 4) Enhancing the security of the Balkans and Türkiye: How to increase resilience together
- 5) Regional cooperation initiatives and mechanisms: How to increase their effectiveness
- 6) Tackling common socio-economic challenges amongst global crises: How to think outside the box

This report provides a general summary of the roundtable sessions, including the main points of discussion and policy recommendations. Since the Convention was held under the Chatham House rule, the names and affiliations of the speakers are not specified in the report.



This report summarizes the remarks made during the workshop.







Session I: Transformation of global geopolitics: How to understand its impacts on the region

The global geopolitical landscape has been shifting towards an uncertain direction compared to the 1990s and early 2000s. The vulnerabilities of the global political and economic system have been exposed by developments such as the global financial crisis, Arab uprisings, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The decline of American hegemony and the return of great power competition have led many analysts to believe that the current state of global politics is experiencing a structural crisis marked by a lack of global leadership. Most recently the Russian invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated the possibility of unprovoked aggression in the current global geopolitical climate.

One discussant offered the term “interregnum” to describe the current state of global politics, with the emergence of multipolarity, increased militarization, and the decline of international norms. In addition to the United States-China competition, the competition between the West and Russia has resurfaced, with NATO identifying Russia as a conventional military threat. The United Nations cannot effectively safeguard peace and order because of its structural problems and conflicts of interest among great powers.

Another speaker noted that after the Cold War the US tried to establish a new world order based on Western values, which marginalized or suppressed alternative views. However, today Russia and China are challenging the established institutional frameworks by providing capital to the rest of the world and developing institutional alternatives. This trend could lead to a world with multiple bounded orders, where different regions operate under different rules and economic relations.

The Balkans is viewed as a playground by external actors. The West sees it as a place to assert power against Russia, while Russia uses it to play behind enemy lines and provide partners with energy. China sees it as a way to offshore money in trade with the US and other countries, while Türkiye views it as an integral part of its Ottoman past and a region where it can establish itself as an economic and cultural power.

The lack of global leadership is a significant challenge for the region. The decline of the European Union’s transformative power has led to a gap, which has created a suitable environment for other players to step in. While the EU is still the primary international actor in the region, the decline in its political and economic influence has caused some Balkan countries to seek complementary or alternative policies for their economic growth and stability. Russia has become increasingly assertive in the region since its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and has intensified its disinformation campaigns. China’s economic relations with all coun-

tries in the peninsula have grown significantly in the past decade, challenging the economic dominance of the EU. As a result, the Western Balkans is gradually becoming a battleground between the liberal international community on the one hand and illiberal powers like Russia and China on the other, with the outcome of this geopolitical competition remaining uncertain. One participant disagreed to this by asserting that Russia and China have already recognized the fact that the Balkans fall under European sphere of influence, and Russia's engagement in the Balkans is rather of tactical nature, aimed at distracting the Euro-Atlantic bloc from the real venues of competition.

Since the early 2000s, the Balkans has not produced large enough instability to become a geopolitical priority for the EU or the wider international community. However, the outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022 has revitalized the interest of the Euro-Atlantic bloc in the region. Despite not yet producing concrete results in the EU integration processes of Western Balkan countries, it is possible to claim that the Russian invasion of Ukraine consolidated the Euro-Atlantic geopolitical front in the Balkans and the Black Sea. Furthermore, the Balkans is gaining importance for the EU's energy security following Russia's cut of gas supply to several EU countries. However, the region is still heavily dependent on Russia for energy. In order to break this dependence, the West should invest in projects aimed at increasing energy diversification, developing renewable energy generation, and enhancing the integration of regional gas and electricity infrastructure. Future energy options for the region will heavily depend on Greece and Türkiye's positions in terms of transit and involve more LNG.

During the roundtable discussion, participants generally agreed that the world is moving towards a multipolar system, which will lead to highly competitive and conflictual international relations for some decades. The Balkans, a region that has always been characterized by its geopolitical complexity and conflict, is vulnerable to these emerging risks. On the other hand, a multipolar world order may also bring opportunities to the Balkans, as competition among global actors offers more space to political elites in the region

to maximize benefits and minimize costs. Countries that can manage their fragilities will benefit from the emerging multipolar order the most.

According to a discussant Russia's invasion of Ukraine has damaged its image and will reduce its influence in the Western Balkans. This presents an opportunity for the EU to boost the Euro-Atlantic integration of this region. With all its problems the EU is still the most essential game-changer in the Western Balkans, offering a clear vision and strategy that no other international actor can match. However, the EU has yet to resolve some of the outstanding issues in the region, leading to the perception that it has not yet become a global player. In order to exert its transformative power and compete with its geopolitical rivals, the EU needs to become more active in the region and drastically change its technocratic approach. Following Russian aggression in Ukraine, the EU has signaled a shift towards a more assertive stance in the Western Balkans. If the EU can effectively address the region's issues, enhance the region's security, and reduce its reliance on Russian oil and gas, the Western Balkans can unequivocally integrate into the Western world.

A participant raised the question of whether the liberal atmosphere of the 1990s and early 2000s was exceptional and the world is returning to a "normal" state of domestic and international politics. If this is the case, the emerging risks and uncertainties will stay for a long time, and prescriptions of the liberal era will not always work in resolving problems. Decision makers in the Balkans will therefore need to think outside the box to cope with the problems in the region.

As the world is entering a "narrow geopolitical corridor", the Balkans must learn to navigate this new reality and work together to maximize the benefits of this emerging multipolar world. Under the uncertainties caused by global geopolitical turbulence, Balkan states should cooperate more to enhance the stability and resilience of the region. The lack of trust among Balkan societies is an important obstacle that needs to be addressed so that they can develop a stronger sense of regional ownership and fully respond to geopolitical challenges.





Session II: Major political problems in the Balkans: How to evaluate the risks

Since the end of the Cold War, the Balkans have faced a challenging transition to democracy and market economy. As seen in the inter-state and inter-ethnic conflicts of the 1990s, the Balkans' heterogeneous, multiethnic, and multi-confessional structure makes it prone to crises and violence. Despite the absence of a major conflict for more than two decades, relations between states and communities have yet to be fully normalized. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Dayton Peace Agreements face criticism from all sides and efforts to reverse post-Dayton arrangements create potential for serious crisis. Negotiations towards normalization between Kosovo and Serbia have not produced any significant results. Bilateral disputes between EU member states and candidates, such as Bulgaria and North Macedonia over history and national identity, continue to occur.

The renewal of threats to Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal stability is causing concern. Ethnic and political frictions persist in the complex political and administrative system that emerged from the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement. According to a speaker, one of the fundamental reasons for the dysfunctional state of Bosnia and Herzegovina is the existence of two autonomous entities, and the primary driver of the country's instability is Serb leader Milorad Dodik's

threats to secede. Dodik has taken concrete steps to establish separate state institutions within Republika Srpska, but his efforts were halted by international pressure. If he continues to push for secession, it could lead to the disintegration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, triggering a major conflict that would spill over into the region. Meanwhile, Bosnian Croats demand electoral reforms to ensure only Croats can vote for the Croat member of the Presidency and the House of Peoples, but the other ethnic groups oppose this. As the elections are approaching, failure to introduce electoral reforms could push the country into deeper crisis. The High Representative has taken some steps in favor of the Croats, which have not been welcomed by the other sides.

In recent years, the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina has significantly regressed. Many Serbian politicians and intellectuals prefer the status quo to continue, believing that Serbia can take action in Kosovo when the time is right. However, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, maintaining the status quo in Kosovo has become much riskier. According to a discussant, Kosovo faces hybrid threats comparable to those that preceded the situation in Crimea before Russian occupation, increasing the risk of violence in the north of Kosovo. Another discussant claimed that the main reason for the backtracking of the normalization dialogue is the failure to follow through on earlier promises, such as the establishment of the Community of Serb Municipalities. In any case, all problems between Serbia and Kosovo boil down to the former's non-recognition of the latter. The non-recognition of Kosovo by two permanent members of the UN Security Council and five EU member states complicates the issue even further. According to a view, Kosovo's rec-

ognition by the non-recognizers should be considered a long-term goal, while it would be more rewarding in the short term to focus on strengthening relations between the communities in Kosovo. Another discussant added that the multi-ethnic city of Prizren can serve as a model for cities inhabited by Albanians and Serbs. Regardless, politicians from both Serbia and Kosovo must seriously invest in real reconciliation.

Balkan countries, particularly those outside the EU, face a major problem of internal fragility. Institutions are relatively weak and politicians are not always committed to basic principles of good governance. Due to the unfinished status of democratization, political leaders are often stronger than state institutions and civil society. Shortcomings include political responsibility, rule of law, professionalism, and effective control mechanisms. In order to survive, political leaders often resort to clientelism, populism, and ethnic politics, serving the narrow interests of certain networks. Conspiracy theories and corruption scandals have led to a general lack of trust in politics and civil society. Politicians' attempts to control NGOs have led to less transparency, opening the door for corruption and organized crime. All these problems cause strong dissatisfaction and pessimism among the Balkan people.

Some speakers pointed out that far-right nationalism exacerbates the internal fragility of Balkan countries by increasing the potential for inter-ethnic provocations and intensifying the geopolitical competition over the region. Far-right nationalists invite third countries like Russia and China to become more involved in regional politics, transforming a regional issue into a matter of global politics. However, internationalists, who believe that the interests of Western countries and corporations are identical to the interests of their own countries, also pose a danger. Instead, the best option for Balkan people is to seek their own country's best interests while cooperating with other countries.

The Western Balkans still consider political and economic integration with the EU their primary foreign policy objective, but due to the absence of a clear prospect for membership and ongoing socio-economic problems, skepticism towards the West remains alive. Russia has capitalized on this, maintaining its influence in the region through local allies including

politicians, businessmen, activists, and media outlets. Taking advantage of the fact that a considerable portion of Balkan people are inclined towards leaders with a strong hand rather than liberal forms of government, Russia offers itself as an alternative path and its president as a role model for political leadership.

Russia's rivalry with the West means it can use regional conflicts for its geopolitical purposes. Some participants argued that if Kiev had fallen during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the north of Kosovo would have faced serious challenges. However, the war did not progress in Russia's favor, and Western capitals have acted proactively in the Balkans to prevent further destabilization. With the EU strongly opposing Russia's war in Ukraine, reliance on Russia by Western Balkan politicians has become more difficult. However, the risk of Russia fomenting chaos in the Balkans in response to Western support for Ukraine remains.

During the roundtable discussion, participants discussed how to resolve challenging political problems in the region. Responding to the question of whether the resolution of the Macedonian name dispute could serve as a model for resolving other disputes in the region, a discussant argued that subsequent developments in North Macedonia's EU accession process made it a "counter-model." Some participants argued that many disputes remained unresolved because political elites believed that the costs of addressing them were higher in the short term than the costs of doing nothing. Therefore, resolving disputes requires courageous leaders who can take domestically-unpopular steps. However, one discussant disagreed by saying that leaders should not defy the will of their own people.

Participants also discussed how external actors can drive or catalyze territorial disputes, citing the infamous non-paper that circulated in newspapers in 2021 as an example of outside attempts to meddle in the region and reshape borders. In response, a discussant argued that even bad ideas could be useful if they led to debates that would ultimately result in an acceptable solution to disputes. Another discussant stated that territorial problems would ultimately be resolved when the Western Balkans are integrated into the EU.



Session III

EU integration as a never-
ending story: How to make
sense of deadlocks



Session III: EU integration as a never-ending story: How to make sense of deadlocks

In the post-Cold War era, the European Union's enlargement policy opened a new path for all Balkan countries, with the EU promising stability, order, and economic growth for the region. In order to join the EU, Balkan states have undertaken comprehensive political, legal, and economic reforms. To date, four Balkan states have joined the EU, while six states are at different phases in their path to membership.

Since Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013, the aspirations of Western Balkan countries to join the EU have been hindered by enlargement fatigue. While the EU continues to declare that enlargement to the Western Balkans is a top priority, concerns about institutional and economic burdens have dampened enthusiasm for enlargement among some member states. The enlargement process has also been disrupted by geopolitical challenges stemming from crises and conflicts around the world. In the Western Balkans, although all six countries declare EU membership as their main foreign policy goal and public perceptions of the EU are vastly positive, the delay in EU enlarge-

ment has diminished optimism for membership and weakened motivation for reforms. Consequently, the EU enlargement process has turned into a charade, with candidate states feigning reform efforts while the EU pretends to support further enlargement.

Some discussants blamed the EU for the slowdown of the enlargement process, arguing that it has not acted as decisively as it did in the early 2000s. Despite maintaining a clear enlargement perspective in rhetoric, the EU has been postponing decisions and introducing new rules and methodologies for enlargement. The momentum achieved by the resolution of the Macedonian name dispute has been lost, damaging the EU's reputation and credibility in the region. Today, some people in the Western Balkans believe that the EU is not genuinely interested in enlargement and is merely stringing Western Balkan countries along with empty promises and complicated mechanisms.

In contrast to these views, several discussants claimed that the main reason why EU enlargement has been on hold for so long is the limited progress achieved by candidate countries in terms of reforms. Accordingly, the hesitation among EU member states about enlargement is due to the shortcomings of candidates in meeting the required criteria and the ongoing disputes in the region. None of the six Western Balkan countries seems to be ready to join the EU, with ongoing inter-state and inter-ethnic disputes, serious flaws in democracy and the rule of law, threats to media freedom, limited space for civil society, and rising far-right nationalism.

The EU's strict application of conditionality has often been criticized as being counter-productive, discouraging reforms, and consolidating the status quo. One speaker disagreed by claiming that easing conditions for expedited membership can lead to bigger complications in the functioning of the EU, which is not merely an economic union but a community of countries with shared values. The revised enlargement methodology aims to ensure that aspiring members fully meet all the required criteria.

The recent dispute between Bulgaria and North Macedonia has shown that the threat of veto power is a serious problem that needs to be addressed. Due to the unanimity requirement in EU decisions, member states can use the accession process to pressure a candidate country to make concessions regarding a bilateral issue. To prevent future instances of instrumentalization, some discussants suggested imposing a qualified majority during the negotiation process while keeping the unanimity principle for the final decision to accept a candidate country into the EU. One participant disagreed with this idea, as it would require a redesign of the EU.

The outbreak of war in Ukraine on 24 February made an immediate impact on the EU's enlargement agenda. Acknowledging the geopolitical costs of non-enlargement, the EU has granted candidacy to Ukraine and Moldova, and on 19 July it started accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. While seeing this as a positive development, discussants were somewhat pessimistic about how quickly the enlargement process will progress, given that the Western Balkan countries are far from fulfilling membership conditions and the EU is opposed to "fast tracks" for membership. Negative ramifications of the war may slow down reforms in the Western Balkans,

and some member states may not view enlargement as a priority for the time being. Internal political problems experienced by Western Balkan countries pose another obstacle to swift progress in adopting reforms.

Under these circumstances the negotiation processes are expected to be long and challenging. A major EU enlargement seems unlikely in the near future, and alternative platforms, such as the Berlin Process, the European Political Community, and the Open Balkan Initiative, are expected to receive more attention from the EU and the US. These platforms can help further dialogue and cooperation, bringing the Western Balkans closer to the EU in the longer run.

The future of EU enlargement will depend very much on how quickly the Western Balkan countries become fit for EU standards. According to some discussants Western Balkan countries tend to expect too much from the EU in terms of political, economic, and societal transformation. While EU membership will contribute to the stability and prosperity of the region, it is not a magical pill that will resolve all existing problems concerning democracy, media freedom, institutionalization, the rule of law, economic stability, and development. Instead of relying on the EU to resolve their problems, Western Balkan countries should take more responsibility and spend more effort to resolve these problems themselves. Seeing Western Balkan countries as properly functioning countries will in turn encourage member states towards enlargement. In the meantime, civil society in the Western Balkans should be more involved in the accession processes, as this will strengthen the capacities of the candidate countries to make a strong push for the fulfillment of benchmarks. NGOs can also take a more active role in lobbying inside the European Union.





Session IV: Enhancing the security of the Balkans and Türkiye: How to increase resilience together

The Balkans have been encountering various security risks and threats, ranging from internal weaknesses such as poor democracies, weak institutions, corruption, and susceptibility to foreign influence, to regional risks such as ongoing disputes between countries, organized crime, and radicalization. In addition, the region has also faced challenges related to global risks that have transcended national borders, including refugee flows and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today the most immediate risks to the security of the Balkans are associated with the war in Ukraine. The geopolitical consequences of the war in the region is difficult to estimate and will clarify according to how the war progresses. One significant factor is how long the conflict will last. At present, there seems to be no possibility of either side achieving a decisive victory, and there are no visible mechanisms that could lead to an agreed solution. As the war continues, Russia is likely to do everything within its power to undermine

the unity of NATO and the EU, and use all possible levers, such as energy, to achieve this goal. Russia will mobilize its proxies in various countries, such as pro-Russian political parties, NGOs, and trade unions, to undermine the Euro-Atlantic bloc. Russia's hybrid warfare against NATO, the EU, and individual countries is expected to intensify.

Russia has long played an influential role in the Western Balkans, using various tactics to establish pro-Russian proxies and invest in oil and gas projects. The overarching objectives of Russia in the Western Balkans are to hinder NATO's expansion and slow down EU enlargement. Russia demands the withdrawal of NATO troops from all countries that joined NATO after 1997, which implies that it opposes the Euro-Atlantic membership of all Balkan countries except for Greece and Türkiye.

Some discussants emphasized that Russia's malicious acts posed a significant threat to the stability of the Balkans. In 2016, there was an attempted coup against the Montenegrin president that was believed to have been linked to Russia, and there was evidence of Russian interference in the 2018 North Macedonia referendum. More recently the Russian ambassador's remarks in Sarajevo have caused concerns about Bosnia and Herzegovina's unity, while Russian support for Serbs has exacerbated the tensions in Kosovo. Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns have been carried out by journalists, politicians, and civil society actors in every Balkan country. Some discussants warned that as the war in Ukraine continues Russia may engage more subversive activities and stir

up instability in the Balkans to divert the attention of the Western world from Ukraine. Thus, hybrid threats coming from Russia constitute one of the most serious security challenges in the region.

Unresolved disputes in the region constitute another important security challenge. It is possible to claim that the Western Balkans are not currently at peace, but rather in a state of absence of violent conflict, and the risk of violence will persist until underlying problems are resolved. One speaker pointed out that around the turn of 2022 Bosnia and Herzegovina faced the greatest existential threat since the end of the war, as there were serious concerns about the possibility of new violence breaking out. In Kosovo, even small issues like the registration of car plates can lead to inter-ethnic and inter-state tensions. Disinformation and fake news campaigns keep security concerns and hateful discourse alive throughout the region, while armed group provocations increase the risk of inter-ethnic violence.

Despite the potential for conflict, the discussants do not expect a repetition of the wars that took place in the 1990s. Today, the region is strongly linked to the Euro-Atlantic security community, with three out of six Western Balkan states being NATO members. International peacekeeping forces, i.e., the Kosovo Force (KFOR) and EUFOR Althea, are present in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, respectively, and the number of deployments in both forces is expected to increase in the near future. Some discussants asserted that the situation in the north of Kosovo is not as serious as portrayed in the international media, and Serbia continues to cooperate with KFOR. However, according to a discussant, Kosovo is highly vulnerable to attack, and until a deal with Serbia is reached, Kosovo's defense capabilities should be enhanced with external support.

Some discussants mentioned the rise of nationalism and populism as another security challenge in the Balkans. As a global trend facilitated by social media and illiberal politicians, the rise of nationalism

and populism is observed throughout the region and has a direct negative impact on the quality of democracy and the functioning of institutions. As a result, public opinion becomes vulnerable to manipulation. Moreover, the rise of nationalism and populism complicates the resolution of inter-ethnic and inter-state disputes, while also creating fertile ground for far-right extremism.

Regional cooperation is crucial in addressing the common security challenges. Individual countries lack the capacity to handle all these challenges alone, but by working together, the region's capacity and resilience can be strengthened. Despite the presence of several regional organizations, region-wide security cooperation is impeded by the non-resolution of the Kosovo issue and inter-ethnic disputes in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nonetheless, political differences should not prevent Balkan countries from uniting against common security threats. To counter hybrid threats, Balkan countries must invest in media literacy and support free media. NATO and the EU can also do more to support Balkan countries in building resilience against hybrid threats.

Participants also highlighted a range of social, economic, and environmental issues as factors that exacerbate security risks. In order to create a better security environment, countries must focus on addressing worsening economic conditions, unemployment, brain drain, and climate change. The recent COVID-19 pandemic exposed the inadequate healthcare systems in many countries in the region, highlighting the need for improvements. Balkan countries also face common environmental challenges such as pollution and natural disasters. One discussant proposed addressing these challenges by establishing a regional crisis center with a broad focus on health, employment, energy, demographics, and disaster management. Another discussant responded that there are already regional initiatives addressing these areas, but they require better financing and coordination.





Session V: Regional cooperation initiatives and mechanisms: How to increase their effectiveness

Since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, various initiatives were launched to consolidate relations among Balkan countries. Despite being often overshadowed by bilateral tensions, efforts for regional cooperation have positively contributed to the promotion of reconciliation and improvement of relationships between countries. Today, there are over 50 regional cooperation initiatives dealing with various sectors, and over the last 20 years, billions of dollars have been invested in regional cooperation. Economic cooperation projects have brought more jobs and cross-border connections, while initiatives in security and defense have encouraged dialogue and collaborations.

One speaker focused on the key role played by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in promoting cooperation in the Balkans. Since its establishment in 2008, the RCC has successfully facilitated coordination and cooperation between various regional organizations, initiatives, and task forces. Through the development of strategic roadmaps with clear targets and mechanisms, the RCC has created a structured and systematized approach to regional cooperation. Rather than drafting projects, the RCC provides a platform for Balkan countries to come together and draft their own documents under the guidance of their respective

ministers. The implementation of projects is supervised by the RCC, which also manages programming between all relevant stakeholders, including NGOs, academia, and the business community.

Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans is closely linked to EU membership. The EU views regional cooperation as a key benchmark for the Western Balkans' accession process and treats it as such. Although the countries in the Western Balkans share the ambition of joining the EU and have expressed their willingness for regional cooperation, political will to advance it is sometimes lacking.

The Berlin Process was initiated to reanimate the European perspective for the Western Balkans when it became obvious that no enlargement would take place in the short term. Its objectives are to facilitate regional cooperation, sustainable economic growth, and resolution of bilateral issues. According to some discussants, the initiative has brought the region closer to the EU and encouraged a more coordinated approach among civil society organizations. It had some tangible results in promoting four of the six flagship initiatives in the EU's 2018 Credible Enlargement Perspective, namely connectivity, socio-economic development, good neighborhood relations, and digital agenda. It has also facilitated the development of a common regional market, making it the highest-ranking political initiative in the Western Balkans and generating support among political leaders, the business community, and civil society. The continuation of the Berlin Process could provide a new way for the Western Balkans to deepen regional cooperation and move closer to EU membership. Although the funding for connectivity projects remains

uncertain, the second phase of the Berlin Process could be useful in further advancing regional agendas.

On the other hand, criticisms about the EU's approach to regional cooperation were also raised. One observer asserted that the EU used regional cooperation initiatives merely to keep the Western Balkans waiting until it is ready to accept the region in. Another participant pointed out that the EU's significant funding contributions have created a power dynamic in which the EU representative frequently determines the agenda and scope of regional cooperation. The Berlin Process has narrowed the scope of regional cooperation in the Balkans to just the six countries in the Western Balkans, with EU-member Balkan countries only invited to share best practices. Despite being an EU candidate, Türkiye has been excluded from these mechanisms, and in response, it has carried out its own initiatives for regional cooperation. The EU is wary of cooperation initiatives from other international actors due to concerns about political influence and corruption. Instead, any efforts that encourage Balkan countries to collaborate should be welcomed as they contribute to peace, stability, and economic development.

While regional cooperation mechanisms in the Balkans have made considerable progress compared to past decades, many regional initiatives failed to be implemented or produced limited results due to bilateral disputes and lack of capacity. Especially in the Western Balkans, initiatives aimed at promoting regional cooperation and facilitating the Euro-Atlantic perspective have yet to create a consensus regarding common objectives. Some initiatives are hindered by egos of political leaders. As a result, Western Balkan countries continue to prioritize their own agendas, and some leaders refuse to cooperate with others in the region.

One of the primary criticisms of regional cooperation in the Balkans is that there is a lot of talk but little progress. One observer complained that the same things have been repeated about regional cooperation for nearly 20 years but the major problems of the region continue to exist. In response, a discussant stated that technical and sectoral cooperation does not necessarily pave the way for resolving major issues, but should be carried out anyway for other benefits. Another discussant noted that the perceived gap between words and actions is partly due to the media's failure to report on the achievements of regional cooperation projects, which, in fact, link Balkan people in many different sectors on a daily basis.

Regarding the Open Balkan Initiative, which is led by Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia, some participants commended its objective of regional integration, but raised concerns about its potential ef-

fectiveness without participation of all countries in the Western Balkans. Those who are skeptical of the initiative raised concerns that the initiative may serve as a tool for certain states to expand their control beyond their borders, and questioned its compatibility with EU laws and values. According to this viewpoint, the Common Regional Market Initiative, supported by the EU, offers a stronger and more institutionalized framework for regional cooperation. In response, one discussant stated that the Open Balkan Initiative can bring benefits for discussing regional issues and building political capital for deeper cooperation, and any decisions made by the initiative that is initially incompatible with the EU can be revised in the future.

Participants concurred that deepening cooperation among Balkan states is crucial for fulfilling the region's potential in economic, political, and human terms and breaking away from negative associations. Such cooperation can boost economic growth, stability, resilience, and the ability to address issues affecting all Balkan citizens. Success stories in regional cooperation should be better disseminated to demonstrate their contributions to the region and encourage further efforts. Think tanks can support regional cooperation by collaborating on projects, organizing multilateral meetings, and promoting accountability to governments, pressuring them to follow through on their promises.

The improvement of regional cooperation in the Balkans requires a combination of political will, transparency, and continuity, as well as a clear vision and effective implementation of regional initiatives and agendas. Regional cooperation should be complementary to the political objectives of building good relations and resolving bilateral disputes, and it should include all countries in the region. Governments in the Balkans must identify areas and mechanisms that will further regional cooperation and make a positive impact on the citizens of all countries. Despite the political disputes in the region, there is a need to develop a strategy to engage with the public opinion and lead the way forward.

Projects that promote connectivity, such as highways and infrastructure, should continue, as they play an important role in bringing people closer and improving communication. Another area in which regional cooperation can be improved is energy security, by creating links between resource-abundant countries and those dependent on Russia's energy. Joint naval exercises and patrols can also ensure the safety of energy resources and pipelines. Additionally, there have been some regional agreements on cooperation to prevent and combat trans-border crime, which can be developed further.





Session VI: Tackling common socio-economic challenges amongst global crises: How to think outside the box

The purpose of this session was to explore a more innovative and comprehensive approach to regional challenges and issues, including social and economic ones. Participants engaged in a roundtable discussion aimed at improving political, economic, and social standards in the Balkans. They discussed which issues should be prioritized and how regional and international actors could help resolve existing problems.

One speaker noted that the world is undergoing significant transformation, and rapid technological changes are affecting all aspects of human life, in addition to geopolitical turbulences. The Balkan countries face a critical decision whether to remain at odds with each other and live in the shadows of the past, or to act in solidarity and catch up with current trends. Cooperation is essential for the relatively small countries of the Balkans to overcome their individual shortcomings, such as the lack of a sea coast or a shortage of qualified personnel. So far many successful cross-border cooperation projects have been

implemented, which have created employment and wealth, although officials do not always show strong will for cooperation.

Another discussant highlighted the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, which was endorsed by the leaders of all Western Balkan countries in October 2020, as a golden opportunity for regional cooperation and development. Governments must act quickly and proactively, as the EU-funded €9 billion budget for the agenda has a deadline of 2028. Countries will only receive funds if they apply with projects. The EU particularly encourages cross-border projects, and Western Balkan countries can cooperate on joint projects and apply for funds. This would help them harmonize their strategies with regard to climate, environment, and sustainability.

Another participant recommended that the EU, Western Balkans, and Türkiye, which have altogether been affected negatively by recent crises and conflicts, should develop cooperation in areas that would bring mutual benefit. One area of cooperation that is worth exploring is offshoring. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the EU's supply chains, largely taken up by China, and the war in Ukraine has led to high inflation throughout Europe. Relocating some businesses from the EU into the Western Balkans and Türkiye could significantly reduce production costs and benefit the economies by boosting output, employment rates, and exports.

Another area of cooperation in which the EU and aspiring members can contribute to each other's econ-

omy is energy. The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War has caused a widespread energy crisis, posing significant economic consequences for the EU. Despite being among the most energy-poor regions in the world, the Balkans has a more favorable position than Western Europe in terms of energy security. The current energy crisis can bring Balkan and Turkish stakeholders together to develop joint projects for energy cooperation and transition to renewable sources. Even though the EU excluded Türkiye from the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, in the current geopolitical setting, it has strong reasons to integrate Türkiye into its energy plans as a market, facilitator, or investor. Increasing connectivity will build more stable relations among countries, as pipelines have done in other regions around the world.

Several participants identified demographic decline and brain drain as critical issues facing the entire Balkan Peninsula. Populations are not increasing, and there is significant emigration of young, educated, and skilled people to the West. Estimates suggest that within a decade, the region may lose up to one million such individuals, increasing its internal fragility and dependence on foreign powers. The causes of brain drain and declining demographics are interconnected with various aspects of life, such as the economy, industry, intellectualism, and, most importantly, politics, which makes people pessimistic about the future. Flaws in healthcare and educational systems are also significant factors. Throughout the region healthcare services are mostly privatized, with people having to pay significant amounts for health, while education standards are insufficient to meet the rapid technological advancements in the world.

Addressing brain drain requires comprehensive internal reform, regardless of EU membership. Failure to do so would result in higher levels of brain drain even if the country joins the EU, as seen in Bulgaria and Romania before. On the other hand, if the EU accession process of the Western Balkans takes too long, people may grow weary and move into EU countries themselves.

In addition to working to stop brain drain, Balkan countries should also encourage emigrated people to contribute to their societies. Incentivizing investment in their home countries and providing them with a secure environment could be a way to achieve this goal. One suggestion is to adopt a multi-layer investment

model similar to Mexico's 3x1 program, which involves the government, local administrations, and migrant organizations, yielding multiple benefits. Political leaders must show genuine commitment to implementing policies to bring back émigrés, as some may not want these individuals to return for fear of alternative ideas jeopardizing the status quo.

During the session participants also evaluated the state of think tanks in the Balkans and Türkiye, and discussed ways to increase cooperation among them. As a part of the civil society sector, think tanks serve various functions that benefit policymakers, bureaucracies, and the public. However, their contribution to policies in the Balkans and Türkiye is mixed, as the sector is still developing in this part of the world. While in some Balkan countries think tanks are better organized and funded, in others they can be short-lived due to shortcomings in terms of funding and institutionalism. Budgetary limitations also make it challenging for think tanks to maintain their independence.

One speaker underlined that think tanks today should focus more on agenda setting, advocacy, and networking. These functions are especially crucial in times of crisis and deadlock, as think tanks can quickly come up with alternative ideas and bring stakeholders together. In response to regional challenges, Balkan think tanks should create alliances that will bring together and encourage stakeholders from political and economic circles to explore potential areas of cooperation. For more effective agenda setting and advocacy, some discussants underlined the importance of developing connections with not only top officials, but also lower-rank officials and experts. According to another speaker, in turbulent times think tanks need to incorporate more people with public sector experience, as these people can develop quick, concrete, and workable ideas.

Past experiences of establishing long-term cooperation among Balkan think tanks have shown that the success of cooperation depends on financial support. Some ambitious initiatives failed before too long after they were launched. Without sustainable funding, short-term, focused and intensive modes of cooperation look more realistic and can bring effective results. Regardless, building and maintaining a strong network among Balkan think tanks is essential for sharing knowledge and exploring collaborative projects.

PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

BALKAN THINK TANKS CONVENTION III, ANKARA, 7-9 SEPTEMBER 2022

Institution	Country
<i>Cooperation and Development Institute</i>	<i>Albania</i>
<i>European Movement in Albania</i>	<i>Albania</i>
<i>Atlantic Initiative</i>	<i>Bosnia and Herzegovina</i>
<i>Center for Advanced Studies</i>	<i>Bosnia and Herzegovina</i>
<i>Center for the Study of Democracy</i>	<i>Bulgaria</i>
<i>ECFR Sofia</i>	<i>Bulgaria</i>
<i>Sofia Security Forum</i>	<i>Bulgaria</i>
<i>Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy</i>	<i>Greece</i>
<i>Institute of International Relations</i>	<i>Greece</i>
<i>Balkans Policy Research Group</i>	<i>Kosovo</i>
<i>Institute for Development Policy</i>	<i>Kosovo</i>
<i>Kosovar Centre for Security Studies</i>	<i>Kosovo</i>
<i>The Balkan Forum</i>	<i>Kosovo</i>
<i>Center for Democracy and Human Rights</i>	<i>Montenegro</i>
<i>European Policy Institute</i>	<i>North Macedonia</i>
<i>Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis"</i>	<i>North Macedonia</i>
<i>GlobalFocus Center</i>	<i>Romania</i>
<i>New Strategy Center</i>	<i>Romania</i>
<i>Romanian Centre for European Policies</i>	<i>Romania</i>
<i>Center for Geostrategic Research and Terrorism</i>	<i>Serbia</i>
<i>Institute of International Politics and Economics</i>	<i>Serbia</i>
<i>Center for Eurasian Studies</i>	<i>Türkiye</i>
<i>Center for Iranian Studies</i>	<i>Türkiye</i>
<i>Center for Middle Eastern Studies</i>	<i>Türkiye</i>
<i>Center for Strategic Research</i>	<i>Türkiye</i>
<i>Diplomacy Academy</i>	<i>Türkiye</i>
<i>Economic Development Foundation</i>	<i>Türkiye</i>
<i>Institute of Strategic Thinking</i>	<i>Türkiye</i>
<i>International Center for Terrorism and Security</i>	<i>Türkiye</i>
<i>The Economic Policy Foundation of Türkiye</i>	<i>Türkiye</i>
<i>Trakya University Balkan Research Institute</i>	<i>Türkiye</i>
<i>Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA)</i>	<i>Türkiye</i>











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