

Has the Western Balkans 6 process become a 'surrogate for the real thing'?



*On 12 July, EU leaders met with Prime Ministers of Balkan countries in the Italian city of Trieste. **Tena Prelec** gives a first-hand account, writing that the 'Western Balkans 6' (WB6) initiative – or 'Berlin Process' – has had the laudable effect of keeping some attention on the Western Balkans in years when the EU enlargement process was paused, but is now at risk of becoming a substitute for enlargement itself, keeping the WB6 countries in limbo. While the jury is still out on the concrete outcomes this process will bring, a particularly bright development is occurring in the field of youth integration, with the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Council (RYCO).*

When Angela Merkel took the initiative to establish what was to become known as the Berlin Process in 2014, she was prompted to do so by Jean-Claude Juncker's very clear statements on the Commission's intention to pause the enlargement process over the course of their five-year mandate. The focus was put on economic and regional integration, in the belief that a common purpose on these fronts would consolidate the region and put it on a better footing to join the EU further down the line. The 2014 Berlin Summit was followed by a 2015 meeting in Vienna and one in Paris last year – finally culminating in the Trieste gathering this summer.

Since the start of the initiative, real prospects of EU integration have still not advanced an inch. While several countries have made good progress on paper, the institutional constraints remain strong – or indeed even stronger, after Britain's decision to leave the EU and the subsequent effort by the EU27 to appear more cohesive, entailing a reluctance to expand the union further. The lack of an actual EU accession roadmap has thus prompted critics to speculate that the WB6 initiative is being used by the EU to pacify the region while not giving it 'the real thing'. States that have made good progress (Albania, Montenegro and partially Serbia) feel particularly betrayed by this purported strategy.



Western Balkans & migration: Macron, Gentiloni and Merkel meet in Trieste. Credits: Tena Prelec

But others point out that the alternative would have been a resounding nothing. As Hannes Swoboda, a prominent former MEP who has taken a leading role in the European Parliament's Western Balkans working group since 1997, puts it, "there simply was no EU enlargement on the table: Angela Merkel was quite right to start this initiative". The European Commission also made it explicit in a memo that the Regional Economic Area "is not an alternative to EU integration", specifying that the initiative would represent "an important milestone for preparation for EU accession".

The countries involved in the process are the neighbouring Germany, Austria, Italy, Croatia and Slovenia as well as the six Western Balkan countries: Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia. Whether including more EU countries would be a productive step or not is a matter of debate (some argue that such a move would dilute the process). At any rate, it has been an encouraging sign that Emmanuel Macron decided to show up in Trieste and make several strong statements ('we need to revitalise... we need to re-found Europe'), giving hope that France's so far lukewarm attitude towards enlargement might shift towards a more supportive stance.

British Foreign Minister Boris Johnson also attended the Trieste gathering, signalling that the UK remains committed to supporting the Balkans' future in the EU – in spite of Britain being entangled in a complicated process headed towards the opposite direction. Next stop: the London Summit in 2018.

Non-political actors – Civil Society, Youth, Business

Initiatives at the margins accompany the process. Representatives of civil society, the media and academia gathered at the Civil Society Forum, exchanging views on some of the key aspects of the dialogue and presenting their [recommendations](#), which were written down in an ad-hoc meeting in Tirana this spring. Was the interchange in Trieste successful? 'We all joined hands and sang Kumbaya', ironically replied one attendant – indicating that the nice words exchanged with the politicians may take a long time to be implemented, if at all.

The business dimension was prominent, but its concrete outcomes are likewise debatable. The business forum gathered around 1,000 actors in total – representatives from the ministries of economy, but also entrepreneurs, banks and European agencies. The successful signing of a Transport Union was overshadowed by the decision by Bosnia and Herzegovina's entity Republika Srpska not to take part in the accord. The Regional Economic Area – wanted by Serbia but greeted with greater reluctance by several other countries – covers matters related to trade, investment, mobility and digital issues such as telephone roaming charges, but its final wording is very vague, only concretely committing the states to implement CEFTA protocols (which they arguably all had to do anyway). A timeframe has not been set.

A particularly bright aspect of the process is the one that concerns youth initiatives: RYCO, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office for the whole WB6 area, was successfully established in Tirana. A total of 13 officers – 7 located in the headquarters, and one in each of the WB6 countries – will lead a programme focused on the integration of young people coming from the region. RYCO's Secretary General Đuro Blanuša explained that the initiative owes a lot to the experience of the Franco-German partnership in the field of youth: the founders have collaborated closely, learning from previous best practices on how to bridge tensions through youth exchanges and shared projects.



Albania's PM Edi Rama at the Civil Society Forum. In the background: Serbian FM Ivica Dačić and Macedonian PM Zoran Zaev. Credits: Tena Prelec.



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Were the Western Balkans even the main theme here?

The trilateral meeting of the three 'biggs' – the host country's PM Paolo Gentiloni, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron – took place on a scenic boat moored outside Trieste's main square, Europe's second largest with direct access to the sea. In the statements that followed, each of them paid lip service to the importance of the integration of the Western Balkan countries, but quickly passed onto what had ostensibly been the main theme of their discussion: migration.

This prompted some to [comment](#) that 'even when the summit is about them, the Balkans are still left at the periphery'. Was it really a missed opportunity? It is too early to say whether the good intentions expressed at the summit will have any concrete outcomes. But surely, a strategy that [privileges stability over deep-seated reforms](#) – such as making pacts with bigger or lesser evils to stem the current migration crisis – would risk bearing only very short-sighted fruits.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUOPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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