



Weekly Briefing

**Albania external relations briefing:
The Berlin Process Leaders' Summit 2023: promises,
aspirations and reality check**

Marsela Musabelliu


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Ju Weiwei

Kiadásért felelős személy: Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

The Berlin Process Leaders' Summit 2023: promises, aspirations and reality check

Introduction

In mid-October 2023, Albania hosted an important event in the framework of the Berlin Process. It was quite a unique occasion since this forum was held outside the European Union (EU) borders for the first time. With the participation of officials from twenty-five countries, there were six prime ministers of the Western Balkans, as well as VIP political figures such as the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen; the President of the European Council, Charles Michel; the Chancellor of Germany Olaf Scholz; the French president Emmanuel Macron, the Greek prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, etc.

The Berlin Process: An Overview

The official launch of the Berlin Process dates back to 2014; it has been a focal point of the then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel to promote regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and support its European integration perspective. It was intended as a platform for high-level cooperation between official representatives of the Western Balkan Six (WB6, consisting of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) and their peers in the Berlin Process, or the EU host countries. The Berlin Process was initiated as an attempt to enhance the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans. The process, at its core, was born out of the need to keep the Western Balkan countries interested in the EU, following a statement made by the then-president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, that there would be no EU enlargement for the next five years. As a political initiative, it aims to strengthen regional integration among the Western Balkan countries and speed up their EU membership path. The process includes regular high-level meetings, summits, and several regional projects designed to improve the infrastructure, increase economic growth, and promote stability and good governance in the region. The Berlin Process is seen as a complementary initiative to the EU's enlargement policy and has been instrumental in keeping the Western Balkan countries engaged with the EU. By providing a platform for dialogue and cooperation, the Berlin Process has helped maintain the momentum towards EU integration, even without any formal enlargement process. The Process also involves the EU institutions, international financial institutions, the region's civil society, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), and businesses.¹ It differs from

other EU initiatives because Germany is the format's initiator, and it primarily addresses economic and regional cooperation issues. Although it started with much fanfare and expectations, it seems it is at a standstill. Some argue that the Berlin Process should be used to increase the credibility of the Western Balkan states' prospects for EU accession because the ideas of the process are significant. Still, their implementation is complex and quite challenging.ⁱⁱ

Albania, the Western Balkans, and the EU

Leaders from several countries in the Balkan region attended the Tirana summit to discuss proposals to bring the region closer to the EU as part of the enlargement process. The event was marked with a red carpet to welcome the guests, and the capital's main streets were closed to traffic due to the attendees' high-level political importance. The Prime Ministers (PM) of Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina were among the attendees. The summit began with a special ceremony on Tirana's main boulevard, hosted by Albanian PM Edi Rama. The leaders took the stage first, including PM Edi Rama, Chancellor of Germany Olaf Scholz, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Council Charles Michel, and Prime Minister of Spain Pedro Sanchez. They praised the host and thanked the attendees, as protocol demands.

Albanian PM Edi highlighted the need for unity in these challenging times. He emphasized that recent events, such as the war on the borders of Europe and the attack on Israel, have shown that the world is changing rapidly and unpredictably. Rama called for a common approach to confront these challenges and stressed the importance of preparing for the future. For Rama, the most significant challenge ahead is the painful division between EU members and non-EU members. He expressed his concern about the difficulty of living without the EU and asked if it is affordable to have such divisions between EU and non-EU countries. In the framework of the Berlin Process, over the last nine years, the leaders of the six Western Balkan countries have collaborated to transform the region into an area that reflects the four freedoms of the EU (Free movement of goods. Free movement of capital. Freedom to establish and provide services. Free movement of people). Despite gaining much experience and exchanging views, the economic promises of the Berlin Process have yet to be fully realized, leading to a gap between expectations and results. In citing Merkel, the Albanian PM pointed at infrastructure: "Democracy without infrastructure could not function properly." By claiming so, the priorities of his country are in the developmental process through upgraded infrastructure. He also pointed out that only 10% of the resources allocated

by the EU are given as grants, while the remaining 90% are in the form of loans with outdated and slow procedures for accessing funds. This has resulted in a significant disparity between Albania and its neighbors in the EU. Albania receives only 138 euros per capita compared to the more than 4,500 euros per capita received by other EU countries. This gap has contributed to the growth of division in the European community.ⁱⁱⁱ

Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, urged for greater collaboration between the Western Balkans nations and the European Union. Emphasizing that there is still a considerable distance between the Western Balkans and the EU economies, she pointed out that preparations for membership still need to be up to the desired standards. The goal is for the Western Balkans to “return” to the core of the European Union as soon as possible. The President of the European Commission emphasized the importance of the EU's relationship with its allies in the Western Balkans. She urged intense cooperation as the only way to help the Western Balkans reach their rightful place within the European Union. The President also highlighted the significance of crucial decision-making moments and advised not to miss opportunities. In her speech, she passionately addressed the conflicts in Ukraine and Israel. Additionally, she mentioned the EU's economic investment plan of 30 billion euros, of which 16 billion euros have already been utilized.

Charles Michel, the President of the European Council, expressed his admiration for Albania's inspiring journey from dictatorship to its current state. He called for cooperation between the EU and the region to overcome crises and promote prosperity and emphasized that enlargement is a crucial investment in the EU's future and the peace and prosperity of its members. He also highlighted the importance of the Berlin Process in promoting practical and operational cooperation between the Western Balkans and the EU. In light of Russia's war against Ukraine, Michel stressed the need for the EU to set standards, promote shared values, and focus on reconciliation and political courage. Last but not least, he urged Kosovo and Serbia to cooperate, emphasizing that reconciliation requires focusing on the future rather than being held hostage by bilateral conflicts.

Olaf Scholz, the Chancellor of Germany, highlighted the importance of cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans in the face of recent escalations in the north of Kosovo. He urged for the swift implementation of agreements reached through the normalization dialogue led by the EU. He also commended the Berlin Process, calling it the most efficient tool for optimizing regional cooperation and integrating all countries involved. Later, in a joint press conference, he argued that advancing a common regional market in the Western Balkans would drive the region closer to EU standards. He stressed the need for a more unified European voice, especially in light of Russia's war against Ukraine. The crises in

the Western Balkans have further underlined the necessity of overcoming antagonisms and working together. Scholz called for an end to regional conflicts and emphasized the significance of the joint regional market and progress towards EU integration. He reassured the audience that Germany remains committed to the Berlin Process.

Emmanuel Macron made history in bilateral relations, officially being the first French president ever to visit Albania. He highlighted the symbolism of his presence in Tirana to be the correction of a mistake, which puts an end to the dismissive approach of Paris in relation to Tirana and Albanians in general. He went on to state that his presence marked a form of re-engagement of France and Albania. The new approach to bilateral cooperation was formalized by signing several agreements in various fields, from energy to security and art. At the same time, the official Tirana reacted immediately by giving two premises to French agencies. This charming attitude was also noted in the European outlets. Indeed, it was highlighted that Macron wants an ‘amorous,’ not ‘bureaucratic’ EU enlargement process. Is this France's U-turn on letting new members join the bloc over the last year?^{iv} Macron took a swipe at the “cold and bureaucratic machinery” in Brussels, saying the process of joining the EU should be more political and less technical, involving economic investments during the accession talks and better political engagement with leaders of aspiring countries. He went even further to describe the EU before 2018 as a hypocritical and cold mechanism, but even today, he thinks there is still work to be done to reform the Union.^v

Official statements after the meeting

In practical terms, the focus was on the “Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.” Proposed by von der Leyen during the summer in Bratislava, this time in Tirana, it was echoed and analyzed further. It rests on four pillars. Firstly, it aims to bring the Western Balkans closer to the EU Single Market, allowing them to join the Digital Single Market in areas such as e-commerce and cybersecurity. Secondly, the plan seeks to deepen regional economic integration by establishing a common regional market because it is crucial for unlocking the region's economic potential and making it more attractive to European investors. The growth plan's third pillar accelerates fundamental reforms in the Western Balkans. These reforms, such as building an independent and efficient judiciary, ensuring sound public procurement, and intensifying the fight against corruption, are essential for boosting investor confidence. Lastly, the aim of increased pre-accession funding. She recognized the need for investment in the region and emphasized that these investments would improve people's lives and facilitate their path to EU membership. The European Commission’s growth plan for the Western Balkans demonstrates the EU’s commitment to

bringing these countries closer to the Union, von der Leyen argued.^{vi}

In total, nine joint agreements and declarations were signed, and according to the official statement of the Berlin Process office, discussions centered around bridging the socio-economic gap between the Western Balkans and the EU, with a focus on fostering cooperation in various policy areas to enhance regional economic convergence. Youth, education, and research were important topics, with establishing the College of Europe campus in Tirana being praised as a significant step towards fostering EU affairs expertise across the region. The need for increased investments in research and innovation was emphasized, with recommendations for establishing Research and Technology Excellence Hubs. Additionally, the summit discussed the potential Value Chain Partnership between the EU and the Western Balkans, prioritizing investments in sustainable mining practices, research, and innovation. In trade, transport, and digital connectivity, the need to boost investments in transport infrastructure was a key focus, with participants supporting various declarations to enhance connectivity and calling for increased efforts towards trade facilitation.

Environmental sustainability was a major topic of discussion during the meeting, notably the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. The leaders present supported the Regional Climate Partnership by endorsing the Joint Declaration of Intent, which emphasized the need for private sector investments in renewable energy, energy efficiency, and sustainable development. Security was also a concern, with participants stressing the importance of deeper regional cooperation and improved information sharing to tackle organized crime and strengthen cybersecurity. The ongoing tensions between Serbia and Kosovo were addressed with a collective call for dialogue and reconciliation. The importance of good neighborly relations and regional cooperation for EU integration was also highlighted.^{vii}

Impact, implications, and potential avenues for the future

First and foremost, Albanians were disappointed with the recent summit as there was no mention of a potential date for their accession to the EU. As a result, the overall process remains stagnant. It is still being determined whether access to the common market and free movement of goods, services, transport, energy, and the digital single market will be enough for Albania's entry into the EU. Albania has yet to set a timeline for potential EU membership, but economic integration is crucial, and any effort towards it is positive.

The Western Balkan countries would benefit significantly from reducing non-tariff barriers to trade and investment, as it would increase regional GDP. However, the economies

of these countries are relatively small compared to the EU, which means that achieving a fully-fledged common regional market alone is unlikely to be a game-changer, even if achieved - if it is not likened to the prosperous EU countries- will not mean much.^{viii} Thus, integration within the Western Balkans is more than welcomed. Yet, more is needed for the region's citizens to narrow the developmental gap between them and the EU countries. Furthermore, the Western Balkan economies have been experiencing slower growth than most EU-CEE countries despite having a lower starting point and theoretically more potential for catching up. Incomplete regional economic integration is one contributing factor but not the main one. The primary reasons for the unsatisfactory financial performance of the Western Balkans are the need for a clear EU accession perspective, the absence of concrete economic benefits associated with EU membership, and the weak reform momentum in many countries. The stalled accession process is closely linked to the latter issue since most of the EU joiners between 2004 and 2013 accomplished their most significant reforms in the years leading up to accession, thanks to the incentives and support provided by the EU. The EU's effort to increase regional economic integration is a positive step. Still, it can have a more significant impact by implementing tangible measures to bring the Western Balkans closer to the EU economically. The combined GDP of the Western Balkans is equivalent to that of Slovakia, which is only about 1% of the EU's GDP. Therefore, providing more access to the EU budget, integrating the Western Balkans into the EU single market, and offering a credible accession perspective could significantly benefit the region's economy.^{ix}

How was it perceived in Albania?

The prevailing sentiment among the general public and analysts was that this was a significant day for Edi Rama, as it provided him with a unique opportunity to demonstrate his ability to engage with the international community at the highest level. There was great anticipation and expectation surrounding the performance on this occasion, and of course, Tirana delivered. Between the symbolism of the past and projections for the future, the Albanian PM showcased his vision for the country. The reception setting for the guests at the end of the intense working day was at a monumental place in Tirana, colloquially called the Enver Hoxha's Pyramid. This building is located in the capital's geographic heart, but also a relic of the past that many seek to forget or deny. This building was created as a political *in memoriam* of Enver Hoxha in 1988, initially serving as a museum about Hoxha's legacy. Decades later, the same pyramid is used as the center stage to showcase the legacy and the vision of another Albanian leader, Rama. In this very symbolic location, Rama introduced a documentary about Albania's history since the declaration of independence in 1912; the

confrontation with the dictatorship and the reconstruction of Tirana were shown before the leaders of the European Union with narration by the Prime Minister himself. When asked about the opulence of it all, Rama answered that it was “a love letter of mine for Europe.”^x He concluded by saying that the European leaders were meeting for the first time in the communist propaganda building, welcoming them to the New Europe of the Balkans and in a building that has been transformed into the region's most prominent digital technology destination.

For some, Rama, the master of turning politics into a show, tried to make the most of the occasion by incorporating it into Albania's internal political discourse. He used the event as evidence of the increasing role and dignity that Albania has taken on in his time as the country's leader. While the summit of the Berlin Process was necessary, Rama's artistic performances and commentary could have been avoided. These performances were more about showcasing his political prowess than the summit itself. However, the summit did provide a platform for Albania to demonstrate its growing presence on the continental stage. Speculations go as far as to describe this as a gift from Brussels to Tirana in exchange for Albania's exit from what they call “an adventure,” namely the Open Balkans.^{xi} For others, Albania's aspiration to become a full member of the EU is a long-standing dream, yet the Berlin Process has already failed but needs to stand on and keep the utopia alive.^{xii} Despite the challenges, the overwhelming majority of Albanians still believe that joining the EU is the way forward for their country.

This summit received extensive media coverage and analysis and sparked numerous comments on social media. Albanians had plenty to say; the prevailing sentiment among Albanian citizens was disappointment and frustration, with many expressing dissatisfaction with the country's lack of progress toward full membership in the EU. With the enlargement fatigue visible in the EU coupled with a carefree attitude from Albanian authorities regarding full-membership prospects, Albanian citizens are more than expected to be very dismissive of the event. However, this time, the comments' inclination was more antagonistic. Perhaps this political pomposity did not sit well with the general population. Indeed, the resentment of unfulfilled promises and a lack of tangible results were palpable in the comments, indicating a growing impatience and disillusionment. The summit may have been a high-profile event, but it has done little to address the concerns of the average citizens.

Conclusion

Notably, these visits of prominent leaders from the EU to Tirana signify a considerable achievement for the Albanian government's foreign policy. The symbolism of these visits is

not lost on the Albanians. While the symbolic importance of these visits is appreciated, it is essential to note that tangible progress must be made beyond mere symbols. The decision of the EU leaders to visit Albania is based on the fact that Albanians have consistently shown the highest levels of support for the EU (amongst all countries of the Western Balkans), as indicated by numerous public opinion polls. This makes Albania a safe and welcoming destination for the leaders looking to strengthen their relationship with the country and the impact of the Union in the area. Like many before, this summit served as a potent reminder that there is still much work to be done to achieve the ultimate goal of Albania's full integration into the European Union.

ⁱ Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Albania (2023). What is the Berlin Process? <https://www.kryeministria.al/en/cfare-eshte-procesi-i-berlinit/>

ⁱⁱ Vulović, M. (2022). The Berlin Process in the Western Balkans: Big Ideas, Difficult Implementation. SWP Comment 2022/C 70, 21.12.2022. <https://doi.org/10.18449/2022C70>

ⁱⁱⁱ Argumentum (2023, October 16). Special coverage/ Summit of the Berlin Process for the first time in Tirana. <https://www.argumentum.al/speciale-samiti-i-procesit-te-berlinit-per-here-te-pare-ne-tirane/>

^{iv} Politico.eu (2023, October 17). Macron wants an ‘amorous,’ not ‘bureaucratic’ EU enlargement process. <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-emmanuel-macron-amorous-bureaucratic-eu-enlargement-process/>

^v A2CNN (2023, October 18). The first French president, Macron in Tirana: Correcting a mistake, we reengage in Albania. <https://a2news.com/2023/10/17/i-pari-president-francez-macron-ne-tirane-korrigjim-i-nje-gabimiri-riangazhohemi-ne-shqiperi/>

^{vi} European Commission (2023, May 30). Keynote speech by President von der Leyen at the GLOBSEC 2023 Bratislava Forum. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/keynote-speech-president-von-der-leyen-globsec-2023-bratislava-forum-2023-05-31_en

^{vii} Conclusions and Agreements - Berlin Process Summit 2023 in Tirana. <https://www.berlinprocess.de/en/the-berlin-process-is-coming-back-to-berlin>

^{viii} BiEPAG (2023, October 19). BiEPAG Reacts: The Berlin Summit in Tirana. https://biepag.eu/blog/biepag-reacts-the-berlin-summit-in-tirana/?fbclid=IwAR3_rw6vLwEY1Y4HvQRigtKQBbGtv5zxakwtkM2BYI47aJjuCyrnU0yo9lo

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Klan TV (2023, October 19). Opinion – Edi Rama (Intervista e plotë). <https://tvklan.al/opinion-edi-rama-intervista-e-plotë/>

^{xi} Bushati, A. (2023, October 16). “Shpërndahuni”! Festa me BE mbaroi. <https://www.balkanweb.com/analiza-andi-bushati-shperndahuni-festa-me-be-mbaroi/>

^{xii} Lubonja, F. (2023, October 16). Procesi i Berlinit ka dështuar, vetëm mban gjallë utopinë. <https://www.gazetatema.net/politika/fatos-lubonja-procesi-i-berlinit-ka-deshtuar-vetem-mban-gjalle-utopine-i411114>