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The Berlin Process and Beyond – An Opportunity to Upgrade the EU Integration Dynamics of the Western Balkans or What?

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Abstract:

This study aims to test whether the Berlin Process yielded novel and accelerated progress as an opportunity to upgrade the EU integration dynamics of the Western Balkans. It employs a longitudinal analysis using a qualitative approach to objectively interpret and evaluate the Berlin Process based on identifying, analyzing, and evaluating the primary and secondary sources. The results show that this process served as a filler to make up for the EU's stray-off from the enlargement project. At the same time, implementation of commitments and achievements remained a paper exercise lacking materialization on the ground. The agreement to extend the Berlin Process beyond 2018 came from the EU's reluctance and inability to reset the enlargement agenda in this region rather than from the Berlin Process's success, as some contend. This study's novelty is that the analysis encompasses in an overarching approach the 2014-2018 performance, its outcomes with the 2018 reloading of the process, and its impact on the Western Balkans' path because of eventual EU integration of this region. It recommends concrete and proactive EU re-engagement in the process, a clear vision and perspective to WB countries, a new policy and strategy, and structured monitoring and checking mechanisms and indicators to take stock of the progress made and further prospect. WB countries should deliver on commitments undertaken and be committed to forging reforms ahead. The study offers a modest contribution to the academic debate about the EU and WB through the Berlin Process and beyond, aiming to predict its potential future and work for its success.

Keywords: Berlin Process, Western Balkans, European integration, dynamics, initiative.

柏林进程及其他——升级西巴尔干地区欧盟一体化动力的机会还是什么？

摘要:

本研究旨在测试柏林进程是否产生了新的和加速的进展，作为升级西巴尔干地区欧盟一体化动态的机会。它采用纵向分析，使用定性方法在识别、分析和评估主要和次要来源的基础上客观地解释和评估柏林进程。结果表明，这一过程起到了填补欧盟偏离扩大项目的作用。同时，履行承诺和取得的成就仍然是纸上

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谈兵，没有在实地实现。一些人认为，将柏林进程延长至 2018 年之后的协议来自欧盟不愿和无力重新设定该地区的扩大议程，而不是柏林进程的成功。这项研究的新颖之处在于，该分析以一种总体方法涵盖了 2014–2018 年的表现、2018 年重新加载过程的结果，以及由于欧盟最终整合该地区而对西巴尔干地区道路的影响。它建议欧盟具体和积极地重新参与这一进程，为世界银行国家制定清晰的愿景和视角，制定新的政策和战略，以及结构化的监测和检查机制和指标，以评估取得的进展和进一步的前景。世界银行国家应兑现承诺并致力于推进改革。该研究通过柏林进程及其他进程为有关欧盟和世界银行的学术辩论提供了适度的贡献，旨在预测其潜在的未来并为其成功而努力。

关键词：柏林进程、西巴尔干、欧洲一体化、动态、倡议。

1. Introduction

German Chancellor Angela Merkel launched the Berlin Process (BP) on August 28, 2014. It coincided with the outbreak of the First World War (1914) and the 10th anniversary of the last 'Big Bang Enlargement' of 10 countries. It might look strange that the conference occurred shortly after Juncker's speech announcing a five-year halt on enlargement (Juncker, 2014) while the process was not advancing. However, it is precisely such a challenge to the enlargement policy that gave way to the Berlin Process as a new initiative to make up for the 'break' created in the EU perspective of the Western Balkans. So they remain on the path of reform. At that time, four of the WB countries held the 'candidate' status, i.e., Albania (2014), Montenegro (2012), North Macedonia (2005), and Serbia (2012), while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo held the statuses of the potential candidates. At this phase, these countries initially perceived the Berlin Process as a substitute for the EU integration or a withdrawal of the EU (at least for five years) from the integration process. Whatever the reason, this situation left a bitter taste.

The Berlin Process made its appearance amidst other numerous already existing initiatives and with some even overlapping. This study explains that what differentiates this one is the fact that it emerged as a high-level, inter-governmental, non-formal EU frame, voluntary-based, political new initiative engaging: WB6 - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo and a self-selected, pro-enlargement group of the EU member states – Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, and the UK. These EU member states, through their presence in organizing, hosting, and setting the agenda, while not officially representing the EU in this process, were expected to follow up on the progress made by WB countries. Their political support explains the high level and political features, with the voluntary participation of all actors involved. This new format with a tiny number of the supporting EU member states would and should make the process more flexible in terms of implementation and outcomes.

Also, the Berlin Process was projected to convene each year until 2018 in one of these EU member host countries, where all WB countries would be equally

represented irrespective of their status and pace in the integration process, bringing to the table their ideas driven by their national interests, which is another new and positive feature of this initiative. However, this required - and today still does - their readiness, political will, and commitment to go through this process effectively, both domestically and regionally, through mutual understanding and cooperation, which, unfortunately, after almost eight years of the Berlin Process, remains a challenge to WB countries in their path to the EU integration.

This process sparked interest among researchers, analysts, and experts to explore and assess it, to follow the track of its implementation, outcomes, and effects over the five-year planned cycle. Nevertheless, an analysis of the post-2018 process, its progress and interrelation with the EU perspective of the Western Balkans needs more attention.

The existing studies fail to offer a comprehensive approach to the Berlin Process going seamlessly from its emergence to date. On the one side, this study explores the Berlin Process course with its origin, objectives, features, implementation, and achievements within and between Western Balkan countries; next, it explores how this process is correlated with the EU accession perspective of these countries. On the other side, it assesses the Berlin Process across two relevant phases – the first concerns the five-year 2014-2018 planned project, and the second, the ongoing process from 2018 to date. These dimensions are closely intertwined in an overarching approach seeking to identify the role and impact of the Berlin Process as a context of WB countries' path towards the EU accession process.

2. Literature Review

The Berlin Process emerged as a new and propitious initiative with specific features and challenging objectives. Since its debut, this initiative sparked an interest and was reflected in think tank papers, analyses in various study centers, and NGOs. At the same time, little can be found in the academic literature. Based on the literature, one can note that the Berlin Process has been referred to, interpreted, and evaluated through two main scenarios – the first covers mainly the first half of

the 5-year limited initiative and presents a promising account of the EU's and WB's commitment and performance in this process. For Lilyanova (2016), it is seen as a way to confirm the EU's continued commitment to the region's accession and to give new momentum to the enlargement process. Lange (2016) considers this process as a way to tackle the symptoms of malaise in the region to keep up the reforms required for the EU membership, while others as a crystallization point for the Western Balkans (Nicić et al., 2016). For Butler (2016), it is a diplomatic initiative intended to reaffirm the Western Balkan region's European integration and bring new impetus to the EU's enlargement project. At the same time, he also points to the potential impact of Brexit on the EU enlargement of the Western Balkans (Butler, 2016). According to Marciacq (2017), the Berlin Process is an initiative aimed at maintaining the momentum of European integration in the Western Balkans. He further refers to this initiative in positive tones as complementary to the EU's enlargement approach seeking to revitalize its ill-functioning approach and not operate as its substitute. He concludes that preliminary observations about this process are rather positive and achievements are promising while admitting, just one year before its planned ending, that it is too early to draw conclusions on its eventual success (Marciacq, 2017). So too, Caliva (2018) goes on the same track considering it an initiative to revitalize the multilateral ties between the Western Balkans and selected EU member states. Flessenkemper (2017) goes further to assess one of the important challenges of the Berlin Process, namely regional cooperation. He argues that the Berlin Process has managed to keep the key member states focused on the region and fostered their cooperation against the backdrop of politically weakened European institutions (Flessenkemper, 2017).

Such an optimistic account continues in 2018, marking the end of its projected operation to enable a more objective and forward-looking assessment of the process. Implementation of commitments, outcomes, and achievements was already a matter of current reality rather than prediction. In this light, Djolai and Nechev (2018) point out the Berlin Process's significant role in setting up favorable conditions for resolving and subsequently implementing and sustaining a solution to any bilateral issue. For Hackaj and Hackaj (2019), the process has underlined the importance for the region to be well connected with the EU for higher growth, better resilience, and the well-functioning of its young institutions. From this perspective, regional cooperation and solution of bilateral issues appear, according to this group of authors, at least at the time, as successful finalization of expectations this process initially aroused.

The second scenario introduces a blurred picture involving a range of problems relating to the impact of the process on the Western Balkans' complex context,

its limitations and risks, and Western Balkans' capacity to overcome challenges within a set of inactive and withdrawn EU institutions. Thus, Kmezic (2015) accepts some positive steps that have occurred in the Western Balkans, such as the Berlin Process continuation in August 2015, the Western Balkans' 6 meetings, the Western Balkans' Connectivity Agenda, and the Declaration on Bilateral Issues signed by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the accession countries on the occasion of the August 2015 Vienna Summit. However, he points out the political messages coming from Brussels whereby European integration of the region will not be accelerated (Kmezic, 2015). Emini (2016) judges the potential lack of implementation and monitoring strategy to oversee the actualization of the commitments made in the respective summits as a threat that can pose a serious challenge for the entire process. Fouéré and Blockmans (2017) consider this process hardly more than just "annual pageantry". This line of analysis goes so far as to question the very continuity of the integration process in the Western Balkans. Musliu (2021) sees the Berlin Process as a sign of the EU structurally rethinking and even withdrawing from further enlargement. She finds out that more than a process in itself, the Berlin Process is yet another strategy to create and proliferate further conditions, requirements, and additional reforms that countries of the region have to tackle before even beginning the official accession talks (Musliu, 2021). For Vurmo (2021), this process was initiated to keep the idea of the WB's 'European future' alive.

These approaches with differing and opposing findings, assessments, and conclusions reflect the specific design, dynamics, short time frame between summits, the intensity of events and activities between them, inability to predict over years what comes next for the process, and lack of factual reporting and data about this process performance. Even though some appear too exaggerated in either scenario, they show an overall and clear picture of the Berlin Process implementation in Western Balkan countries, its impact on their domestic stage, and the EU integration prospect for this region. However, they fail to assess the above in symbiotic relation with the post-2018 performance of the process, their impact on the current EU-WB interaction context, the grounds on which the process was agreed to continue, whether and how its continuity affects accelerating and speeding up the EU accession prospect in the region, and how this could be achieved and predict potential future of this process.

3. Methodology

This study employs a longitudinal analysis using a qualitative approach to objectively interpret and evaluate the Berlin Process in its multifaceted course. In order to deconstruct the evolution of the Berlin Process from its pre-planned 5-year timeframe to further reloading and its impact on the EU integration

dynamics of WB6, it is based on the identification, analysis, and evaluation of documents, reports, official declarations, statements, speeches as primary sources and articles, policy briefs, think tank opinions, research opinions as secondary sources. Furthermore, the theoretical analysis of the origin of the BP, its aim, objectives, actors, mechanisms to put it into motion, achievements, and results to date will help build up a complete and clear picture of the Berlin Process initiative and its correlation with the Western Balkans accession perspective given their eventual EU integration.

Therefore, the research question is:

- Has the Berlin Process, given its aim and objectives, yielded a novel and accelerated progress as an opportunity to upgrade the EU integration dynamics of the Western Balkans?

In order to complete the framework of the research question, this paper poses the following sub-questions:

- Has the Berlin Process fulfilled its target objectives, and if so, to what extent?

- How and to what extent has the Berlin Process affected the Western Balkans' path to European integration?

- Following the post-2018 evolution of the Berlin Process, how will it henceforth go to achieve the target objectives given the EU integration dynamics of WB countries?

Seeking to provide answers to the above questions, the objectives of this study are:

- Taking an insight into the context leading to the Berlin Process;

- Identifying the features and assessing the performance of each summit given meeting the objectives set;

- Exploring the post-2018 ongoing Berlin Process to assess its impact on WB6's path to the EU integration.

The research raises the hypothesis that the Berlin Process 2014-2018 barely fulfilled its objectives in the Western Balkans. The ongoing post-2018 Berlin Process has not been driven by positive performance and achievements but by the EU's reluctance to re-engage in this process.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Berlin Process – An Innovative Initiative in a Fragile Western Balkan Context

The Berlin Process hit the ball on the WB6's court to go on its own and fulfill commitments aiming to bring WB countries closer to the EU's values and principles and pave the way for their EU integration. Within this landscape, the overall objectives of this process carefully crafted to fit into the EU agenda for the Western Balkans were a) resolution of outstanding bilateral and internal issues; b) achieving reconciliation within and between the societies in the region; c)

enhancing regional economic cooperation; d) laying the foundations for sustainable growth (Marović, 2018; Emini, 2018). Participation of the civil society and youth in summits is a novelty with a direct impact on the expected monitoring of the reform processes, government accountability, and improving regional cooperation. The Final Declaration of the Conference on the Western Balkans of 2014 emphasizes "endeavors to make additional real progress in the reform process" (Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, 2014).

Addressing existing issues within the Western Balkans in their course to meet the EU accession conditionality and regarding experiences, specificities, and consequences from previous waves to the accession, the EU adopted a stricter position towards WB6 to focus on implementation to make real concrete progress rather than merely on adopting rules, tasks, and recommendations. Moreover, following the EU's 5-year suspension, this was the case for the WB countries to take ownership and witness responsibility.

To do this, the Berlin Process distinguishes hard measures, including regional or national infrastructure projects, and soft measures, including border-crossing procedures, railway reforms, information systems, road safety, maintenance schemes, unbundling and third-party access, and other policy measures (EU Connectivity Agenda, 2015). Truly, the complementarity of investments in infrastructure or hard measures is highly dependent on the implementation of the soft measures, including adapting existing legislation (Cooperation and Development Institute/ShtetiWeb, 2017). As such, the proper and hand-in-hand implementation of hard and soft measures in line with the EU enlargement strategies is necessary for an effective connectivity agenda.

To that end, the projects, programs, and initiatives designed within the Berlin Process were expected to enhance regional cooperation among the WB6 in economic, political, and social areas and to promote sustainable growth while keeping the EU accession perspective on the agenda. This would bring WB countries closer to the EU and pave the way for their fully fledged integration. The EU, on its side, would provide financial support through WBIF Facility. Overall, financing of transport and energy projects would come from a mix of sources ranging from WB6 national budgets, Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) to International Financial Institutions (IFI), bilateral, and Public-Private Partnership formulas (Hackaj & Hackaj, 2018). An Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance was created with a budget of 11.5 billion euros for the period 2007-2013 (IPA I) and 11.7 billion euros for the period 2014-2020 (IPA II) (Holman, 2017).

However, the Berlin Process poses some weaknesses as well. As Marciacq (2017) puts it, this initiative did not create new legislation to replace the EU's. It neither

rested on new institutions nor provided new funding capacities. No specific institution is tasked with overseeing the strategic development of the process or monitoring its achievements. There are no steering or built-in monitoring mechanisms and no structured steering and reporting mechanisms (Marciacq, 2017). The lack of such mechanisms still resonates, making it impossible to come up with an assessment of the progress of each of the WB6 summits and events in-between, their achievements, implementation of the reforms, outcomes, delivery on the commitments, and accordingly, drafting of relevant progress reports as it is the case for the EU.

Despite this landscape, one year before this process was agreed to end, the EU expectedly re-engaged in the enlargement project of the Western Balkans. Host countries' actors proclaimed the Berlin Process a positive undertaking worth continuing. Thus, on May 31, 2017, the German Foreign Minister, Sigmar Gabriel, commending in his opinion what the Berlin Process had achieved by then as a 'positive dynamic created,' stressed the need for a 'Berlin Process reloaded,' pointing to visible improvements this process must generate for the local populations (Federal Foreign Office, 2017). This step signaled the formal extension of this initiative and its restructuring, aiming for better implementation and tangible outcomes in WB6. Indeed, the Italian Chair at the Trieste Summit 2017 declared that participants agreed to continue the process beyond 2018 (EU Delegation to the Republic of Serbia, 2017) without further 'confession' about such a decision. This study explains that the Berlin Process marched ahead beyond 2018 not for effective outcomes and achievements but for the EU's comfort to keep its disengagement approach to the enlargement process of the Balkan region. Continuation of the Berlin Process

implies continuing the EU's 2014-stated 'break' in force.

4.2. Actors and Format of the Berlin Process (2014–2018)

The Berlin Process, as agreed, took place in five consecutive annual summits (Table 1). Regarding its aim and objectives, participants held numerous meetings, conferences, and forums in the run-up to and following up on the summits, preparations for the next summits, and stocktaking of past summit commitments. According to the structure in all the above phases, the participants were representatives from: *i.* WB6 - Heads of States and Governments, Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Economy, civil society, youth, and businesses; *ii.* Berlin Process host countries - Prime Ministers and Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Economy; *iii.* The EU institutions - the European Commission President and V/President, European External Action Service (EEAS), DG NEAR Commissioner, the member state holding the Presidency of the Council and since the Paris Summit also the HR of the EU Foreign Policy and Security Affairs; *iv.* International financial institutions – European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), European Investment Bank (EIB), other investment institutions grouped in the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) and the Connectivity Europe Facility (CEF); *v.* Regional initiatives – Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), South East European Transport Observatory (SEETO), Energy Community (EnC), Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), Regional Anti Corruption Initiative (Rudan, 2018). Based on the same source, the relevant topics and commitments for each summit are presented in Table 1 to provide a clear understanding of the context in which they operated.

Table 1. Topics and Commitments of the Berlin Process 2014-2018

Summits	Topics and Commitments
Berlin Summit (August 29, 2014)	<i>Topics:</i> Regional cooperation; Transport community; Independence of judiciary, fight against corruption; Vocational education. <i>Commitments:</i> Yearly Summits will provide a framework for four years to achieve “additional, real” progress in economic cooperation, sustainable growth, reconciliation, and bilateral issues; Germany will foster media freedom in the WB; The WB6 will work intensively on developing the Energy Community.
Vienna Summit (August 27, 2015)	<i>Topics:</i> Bilateral issues; Migration and fight against terrorism; Economic prosperity; Connectivity agenda; Youth; Education and science. <i>Commitments:</i> Declaration on Regional Cooperation and Solution of Bilateral Disputes signed; Declaration on Establishment of RYCO signed; Annual Economic Reform Programmes (ERPs) will be prepared; six transport and four energy infrastructure investment projects agreed upon; The list of “soft measures” to be implemented before the Paris Summit was agreed upon; Establishment of a regional energy market agreed upon; 1 billion euro for connectivity projects will be made available from IPA II; Obstacles to the Transport Community Treaty to be overcome.
Paris Summit (July 4, 2016)	<i>Topics:</i> The rule of law and anti-corruption; Youth; Environment; Migration and fighting terrorism; Connectivity agenda. <i>Commitments:</i> 3 new railway projects agreed upon, and the program for energy efficiency received additional funding; Soft measures to be implemented; A roadmap for setting up of a regional market for electricity agreed upon; Proposals for increasing the access for the region’s youth to the Erasmus agreed upon; Western Balkans Sustainable Charter agreed upon; Agreement on the Establishment of RYCO signed; Young Civil Servants Pilot Scheme launched.
Trieste Summit (July 12, 2017)	<i>Topics:</i> Connectivity agenda; Transport community; the rule of law and fight against

London Summit (July 9-10, 2018)

corruption; Regional economic integration; SMEs development; Education and science.
Commitments: Treaty Establishing Transport Community signed; Multi-annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area adopted; Joint Declaration against Corruption agreed upon; 7 additional connectivity investment projects agreed upon; A grant for co-financing and the balance loans from the EIB and the EBRD provided; Connectivity Europe Facility (CEF) mobilized for the first time; IT Summit to be held; 48 million euro will be provided for SMEs through WB EDIF; Western Balkans Research Foundation to be established.
Topics: Security issues; Regional cooperation and good neighborly relations, missing persons and war crimes; Fight against corruption; Digitalization – youth education.
Commitments: Principles of regional cooperation in information exchange for law enforcement agreed upon (Declaration); Roadmap for a sustainable solution to the illegal possession, misuse, and trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons and their ammunition in the WB by 2024 agreed upon; Declarations on regional cooperation and good neighborly relations, on missing persons, and war crimes were signed and stocktaking of progress in the resolution of bilateral issues agreed upon; Anti-corruption country commitments were made; The Berlin Process Security Commitments Steering Group was set up.

4.3. How the Berlin Process Performed during the Five-Year Cycle

4.3.1. The Berlin Summit 2014

The five summits from Berlin (2014) to London (2018) each have their own specificities in terms of implementation, topics, commitments, areas concerned, outcomes, and achievements. The Berlin Summit 2014, which set the agenda and format of the whole process and also gave the process its name, as Hackaj and Hackaj (2018) put it, joined the two permanent features of *connectivity* and *regional cooperation* under a political roof, which remained as such throughout the implementation of this process.

Connectivity, even though not mentioned as a concept in this summit, is expressed by the “further developing energy community” and “improving WB6 logistical connections to EU markets” (Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, 2014). Indeed, infrastructure investments between the EU and WB6 in transport and energy, termed inter-connections, have been constantly present in enlargement strategies. So too, regional cooperation has been essential as a precondition to the enlargement perspective for WB countries under the Stabilisation Association Process. However, in the Berlin Process, these two features became the two main pillars through which the aim was to improve the links and collaboration between the WB countries and EU member states, and also to fulfill preconditions toward the enlargement prospect.

Furthermore, the connectivity agenda under the Berlin Process was a multi-dimensional enterprise comprising (a) connectivity in strategic infrastructure investments, not only on transport and energy, but later also digital service infrastructure; (b) the connectivity of people by institutionalizing the involvement of civil society organizations and youth; and (c) the connectivity of businesses through participation of the WB6 business community in BP summits. Such an approach, among others, would help foster growth and jobs, considering the high youth unemployment rates all over the WB countries at the time.

Bilateral disputes were another very important

feature set on the agenda of this summit, which, as stated in the Final Declaration by the chair of the Berlin Conference 2014, would be one of the main topics that would be discussed in this specific international forum (Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, 2014), with regard to the increased instability in the region. The declaration stressed two main disputes: the one between Serbia and Kosovo on the latter’s recognition and the other between Greece and Macedonia over the name issue. These bilateral issues were of an internal nature, namely between the WB countries themselves, and an external nature between an EU member state and a WB country. However, no data were announced regarding concrete steps about the implementation of this topic and the others concerned. All that could be praised at this phase of the initiative involved the regular meetings set according to the agenda between leaders of WB6 countries in this meeting. More specifically, this summit paved the way to a historic visit by the Albanian prime minister to Belgrade in November 2014, the first visit after 68 years (Nechev et al., 2018), which further led them to spur on the idea for the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) and so on.

4.3.2. The Vienna Summit 2015

After several Berlin Summit follow-up meetings, the second summit was organized as scheduled in Vienna in August 2015. In addition to connectivity and regional cooperation, this summit tackled another very important feature—bilateral disputes. The WB6 leaders approved and signed the Declaration on Regional Cooperation and the Solution of Bilateral Disputes in the presence of Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, Slovenia, the European Commission, and the European External Action Service (EEAC). In the declaration, the governments from the region “commit[ted] to resolve any open questions through bilateral negotiations or other means of peaceful settlement of disputes” (The Chair of the Vienna Western Balkans Summit, 2015). Signing of this declaration was a success, as progress in dealing with and solving bilateral disputes would also foster progress in other components, with regional

cooperation topping the list.

A positive sign about the implementation, achievements, and effectiveness of this summit and beyond was the WB6 pledge to report on the progress made at every consecutive Western Balkans Summit. However, as observed from research and analyses, “such reports are neither publicly available, nor is there a mechanism for tracking their implementation” (Marović, 2018), a matter of transparency that was associated with every phase of this initiative and remained positive only on paper.

Inclusion of the Civil Society Forum (CSF) in the summit agenda comes as a novelty, thereby allowing nonpolitical representatives of civil society organizations (CSO) to voice their concerns at the same table as their heads of state and high representatives of the EU Commission (Cooperation and Development Institute/ShtetiWeb, 2017).

Regarding the topics covered, the participants agreed on a list of regional transport and energy priority projects; notably, the Vienna Summit approved six projects on transport infrastructure and four on the issue of energy (The Chair of the Vienna Western Balkans Summit, 2015). The EU was also present and active with its financial support. The European Commission pledged €822.2 million in investments and grants (Energy Projects, 2015). The WB countries committed to implementing several legal and regulatory measures to help create electricity-based trade, which included the developing of spot trading, coupling of the regional market, regional balancing, and capacity allocation (The Western Balkans Investment Framework, 2016), aimed at economic integration of the SEE region, which encapsulates EU member states and WB6 countries as their close neighbors.

Another important point covered in this summit was education. The leaders agreed on the need for a new vocational training system to fill existing gaps and better respond to labor market realities (Lilyanova, 2016). Noteworthy at this summit was the signing of a joint declaration to establish a Regional Youth Cooperation Office in the WB.

Issues related to terrorism, such as the fight against extremism and radicalization, as well as the refugee challenge (Lilyanova, 2016), were also on the agenda, which comes as another call to put such topics on the agenda in the following summits. This summit also witnessed the signing of two border agreements: the first between Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which came into effect in April 2016, and the second between Montenegro and Kosovo, which was ratified by both parties in 2018 (Nechev et al., 2018).

Given the above, the Vienna Summit, according to some experts and analysts, is the most successful and fruitful of all Berlin Process summits [note of the authors – implying till 2018] (Balkan Policy Research Group, 2018), which gives rise to the question of how effective and to what extent each of the five Berlin Summits 2014-

2018 met their goals to add value to the enlargement prospect for the WB countries, not to mention 'what comes next' analysis over post-2018 summits.

4.3.3. *Paris Summit 2016*

The Paris Summit on July 4, 2016, held under a Brexit atmosphere, as stated in the Final Declaration of the Chair, aimed at ensuring increased coherence with the different regional initiatives promoting regional cooperation in light of the region's European perspective and covered four important topics: regional cooperation, connectivity, and trade, youth, as well as current challenges which include migration, terrorism, and radicalization (The Chair of the Paris Western Balkans Summit, 2016). It also included in the agenda bilateral disputes and environment/climate change (Lilyanova, 2016), given the current security and climate-related challenges. Most important, given the Brexit referendum results, the Paris Summit reassured the WB countries that their future lies in the European Union (Cooperation and Development Institute/ShtetiWeb, 2017).

This Declaration refers to previous Summit meetings for the progress made in areas such as youth cooperation and connectivity and further adds that the dynamic created by these meetings has significantly contributed to improving cooperation and good neighborly relations in the region (The Chair of the Paris Western Balkans Summit, 2016). However, a more concrete account in this regard would provide a clearer and more convincing picture of the progress made in these areas.

One of the achievements of this Summit was the establishment of RYCO, which some analysts consider the most efficient and tangible output of the Berlin Process and WB6, albeit they agree that more needed to be done to tackle the high level of youth unemployment in the region (Balkan Policy Research Group, 2018). RYCO would support individual and group regional youth exchanges such as internships, fellowships, training, apprenticeships, or group exchanges such as study visits, seminars, and workshops (Regional Youth Cooperation Office, 2017). From its conception and structure, this initiative was expected to promote and enhance reconciliation, friendship, cooperation, and cultural exchange in the spirit of common understanding and commitment.

Still, the lack of transparent data regarding the appointments according to the composition, operation, and relevant funding makes it difficult to assess the progress and efficiency of this initiative throughout its implementation. Did it yield significant and visible outcomes to meet the goals for which it was established? How is it going? What are its strengths and weaknesses in upgrading its implementation?

As regards connectivity, the Paris Summit offered an opportunity to review the 10 agreed infrastructure projects, launch new ones and address funding issues (Lilyanova, 2016). What happened? This Summit

somehow addressed the shortcomings related to the implementation and efficient operation of projects already launched in the Vienna Summit 2015 by emphasizing a more efficient implementation. Also, WB6 governments approved the Regional Energy Efficiency Program and Green for Growth Fund on Renewable Energy Schemes for the Western Balkans. They agreed on a roadmap for the Regional Electricity Market (Balkan Policy Research Group, 2018). The Paris Summit approved three new railway projects in Serbia, Albania, and Kosovo, amounting to €595.4 million, of which the EU pledged around €100 million. At the same time, the rest would be covered by financial institutions and the national budgets of the beneficiary countries (Transport projects, 2016).

The Summit Chair considered regional cooperation the only way to face common challenges (The Chair of the Paris Western Balkans Summit, 2016). Accordingly, participants in the Paris Summit called for further strengthening of return, readmission, information exchange, coordination, joint operations to fight smugglers' networks and organized crime, enhanced cooperation between border police forces, and concrete initiatives to facilitate stronger regional partnership mechanisms between the private sector, governments, vocational education and training (VET) institutions, and civil society (Lilyanova, 2016). Delivering on these topics would directly bring success to regional cooperation, which in turn would positively influence issues related to bilateral disputes. However, a real assessment between commitments made and achievements delivered remains bleak even in this case.

Other than in the Vienna Summit, civil society was not represented in the Paris meeting and accordingly not mentioned in the relevant Final Declaration. Also, bilateral issues 'despite the formal affirmation of readiness for solving these disputes' (Nechev et al., 2018) saw no step forward in this Summit.

4.3.4. Trieste Summit 2017

The Trieste Summit 2017 is placed under the sign of 'consolidation of the Berlin Process *acquis*' (Cooperation and Development Institute/ShtetiWeb, 2017). For the first time, it moves from regional cooperation to regional integration, where participants reaffirmed their unequivocal support for the Western Balkans' European perspective, pledging to work for better inclusion of the Western Balkans, acknowledging the different stages achieved individually, and confirming that everyone will be judged on their own merits (EU Delegation to the Republic of Serbia, 2017).

The Trieste Summit focused on connectivity, regional economic integration and development, private sector and SME development, youth, governance; the rule of law, prevention, and fight against corruption; science, bilateral issues, civil society; fight against

terrorism, extremism, radicalization, and organized crime; irregular migration (EU Delegation to the Republic of Serbia, 2017). This Summit brought connectivity to a new stage, adding increased trade, investment, qualified labor mobility, and digitalization (Nechev et al., 2018). As expressed in a Policy Report of Balkan Policy Research Group (BPRG) referring to the energy projects document, Trieste approved one project for Macedonia, two for Serbia, and four for BiH, for which the EU pledged €535.8 million and granted €194.1 million. On the other hand, Kosovo and Albania did not present any projects, which the authors consider as signaling a lack of preparation since, at that time, both governments were facing severe political crises at home and election cycles (Balkan Policy Research Group, 2018). It further explains that this Summit endorsed a Regional Strategy for Sustainable Hydropower Generation in the Western Balkans, aware of the major role of the hydropower sector in the contribution of renewable energy.

A milestone of the Trieste Summit was establishing the Multi-Annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area (MAP REA). Based on non-discrimination, creating a level playing field for all within the region, REA put forward concrete measures aiming at an unobstructed flow of goods, services, capital, and highly skilled labor, making the region more attractive for investment and commerce, accelerating convergence with the EU, and bringing prosperity to its citizens, which comprised four components – trade, investment, mobility, and digital integration (Regional Cooperation Council, 2017). This document explains that MAP has been developed upon the request of the Western Balkans Six Prime Ministers to prepare a "proposal for a joint approach to furthering economic cooperation in the Western Balkans," stems from the commitments within the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) and South East Europe 2020 Strategy (SEE2020) frameworks, and is based on CEFTA and the EU's rules and principles reflected in the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs). This proposal was made in the Sarajevo meeting in March 2017, which must be seen as a positive sign of six prime ministers all seeing each other as equal counterparts in one of the WB countries in a collaborative and benevolent setting.

As to the timeframe of REA implementation, it was left to WB6 countries to decide (European Commission, 2017), holding that it should be set by the parties themselves depending on their ambition while European Commission would support them. However, the implementation of this initiative and the timeframe required to produce visible results posed a specific challenge – it revealed the free movement and visa liberalization issues to be addressed for Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Final Declaration stresses the EU commitment

to financially support RYCO to implement RYCO's program and measures taken by the European Commission to improve the uptake in the EU's Erasmus+ program in the Western Balkans, supporting the mobility of young volunteers, youth workers, students, and academic staff and institutional capacity building (EU Delegation to the Republic of Serbia, 2017). The present Declaration includes the Western Balkans in the 'European Youth Portal' to help young people from the region take advantage of the opportunities to work, learn, volunteer, and travel in the European Union.

The Trieste Summit paid special attention to the strategic importance given to SMEs through innovative partnerships with the public sector, their involvement in the VET dual system, the boost given to their financing and entrepreneurship capacity, and the support to the establishment of the Secretariat of Chambers of Commerce of WB6 (Hackaj & Hackaj, 2018). Also, the EU Presidency and the European Commission co-signed the TCT/Transport Community Treaty with participating countries (Balkan Policy Research Group, 2018), which is of special importance as it reflects a treaty signed with the EU institutions.

Based on the meetings, topics, commitments, and relevant decisions, it might be said that the Trieste Summit remained focused on and prioritized connectivity's economic and transport dimensions. Nevertheless, an assessment of the achievements would be incomplete or even inaccurate given this initiative's structure and operation and lack of formal and regular monitoring, controlling, and evaluating mechanisms. What we commonly know is that participants in the Trieste Summit welcomed the readiness of the United Kingdom to host the 2018 Summit of the Western Balkans, agreed to continue the process beyond 2018, and expressed great satisfaction with the prospect of further high-level events in the region (EU Delegation to the Republic of Serbia, 2017). This Summit decided and formally announced the continuation of the Berlin Process without an assessment of the content and reason for such an agreement and how it would relate to the WB countries' enlargement strategy.

4.3.5. London Summit 2018

The Berlin Process Summit 2018 was organized in London, a non-EU country today. Ironically, this summit to foster the EU integration of WB6 would be hosted by a country that had already left. The UK has constantly been a vocal and strong advocate of WB's prospect of the EU membership. However, the UK will likely continue to be an important actor in matters related to WB integration. According to a Policy Report of BPRG, 'the UK government has intensified high-level visits to the region and reframed its WB policies. The main goal of the London Summit will be to ensure partnerships with and ownership of WB6 governments' (Balkan Policy Research Group, 2018).

This is further confirmed by British Prime Minister Theresa May, stating that Britain will continue to play a leading role in Europe after Brexit. In the run-up to the summit, the UK will enhance security cooperation with WB partners. Prime minister May also stated that the agenda would encompass various issues, including organized crime, anti-corruption, and cyber security (British Prime Minister's Office, 2017).

The leaders adopted three declarations: a Joint Declaration on Regional Cooperation and Good Neighborly Relations, a Joint Declaration on Missing Persons, and a Joint Declaration on War Crimes. They reaffirmed their commitment to achieving a stable, secure, and prosperous Western Balkans region, anchored to European values and systems and contributing to European security. In the same line as previous summits, they also unanimously reaffirmed their unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans. The topics concerned shared European values, prosperity and connectivity, regional cooperation, security, youth, and civil society (Western Balkans Summit, 2018).

4.4. Exploring Post-2018 Berlin Process – A Necessity to Boost Regional Cooperation and Connectivity Agenda

The Berlin Process, as announced previously, was agreed to continue after the London Summit 2018. So far, three summits have taken place – Poznań Summit 2019, Sofia Summit 2020, and remotely-held Summit 2021. There is generalized information about the effectiveness, necessity, benefit, role of the Berlin Process in the WB integration process until 2018, and the reason for its continuity. Moreover, from all documents and materials available, not much was accessed about topics, commitments, areas, tasks and recommendations between summits from 2018 to 2021, progress made, role in the WB integration process, the benefit of its continuation, and the like. How long will the Berlin Process continue? How has it evolved and impacted the European perspective of the Western Balkan (WB) countries, as seen from today's perspective?

The year 2019 was the beginning of a new phase in the implementation of the Berlin Process, and at the same time, it marked the continuity of this process. Following the five 2014–2018 summits discussed above, the 2019 summit was hosted by Poland in Poznań.

The leaders who participated at the "Berlin Process Summit" in Poznań unanimously reaffirmed their unequivocal support for the European perspective of the WBs. They stressed their support for the *Connectivity Agenda* and Regional Economic Area as well as the commitment to strengthen the rule of law, fundamental rights, and good governance in the region. They revealed the role of civil society members and businessmen in drafting policies and making proposals

for solutions to the regions' crucial problems (European Western Balkans, 2019b). Other issues addressed were entrepreneurship, the Green Agenda, and Roma integration.

A special space was dedicated to the youth in this summit. The leaders welcomed, among others, the EUR 10 million Youth Guarantee scheme, launched by the Commission together with the EIF/European Investment Fund at the beginning of 2019. They also announced the upcoming first joint-presidency of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia for 2020 (Regional Cooperation Council, 2019). This summit, which for the first time witnessed a co-presidency between an EU and a WB country within the framework of the Berlin Process, marked a positive step toward the spirit of cooperation between the two countries and was testament to the increased collaboration of this process.

The "Sofia Summit 2020" built on the previous summits (Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Trieste, London, and Poznań) by reaffirming the Berlin Process' importance as a catalyst for high-level cooperation between the WBs and their EU peers participating in The Berlin Process in light of their European integration prospects (Transport Community, 2020). According to this document, the leaders underlined the importance of regional cooperation and pledged their continuous support to different collaborative initiatives and mechanisms to boost the regional potential for strengthening the economy, people-to-people contacts, and good neighborly relations.

The leaders of the WB also agreed on the Declaration on Common Regional Market—a catalyst for deeper regional economic integration and a stepping-stone toward the EU Single Market—and they also adopted an action plan for the period 2021–2024 based on the EU's four freedoms. They commended the European Commission's (EC) Economic and Investment Plan for the WB, accompanied by the proposed Green agenda. Also, they welcomed the Commission's aim to mobilize up to EUR 9 billion of grant funding under the future Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance to support the socio-economic convergence of the region with the EU. The leaders also welcomed the new package of connectivity projects presented by the EC under the WBIF (Transport Community, 2020). Generally, the summit tackled the same topics as those in the Poznań Summit, commending what had been achieved by then, some aspects of which should be taken with reservation considering the concurrent state of play in the Western Balkans.

The last (at least by far) Berlin Summit 2021 was held remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The document of Chair's Conclusions initially mentions the evaluation of the progress made since the first summit and the future of this process. More specifically, it

states: "Building on the previous summits in Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Trieste, London, Poznań, and Sofia and the outcomes of several ministerial and technical meetings in the past few weeks, the discussion took stock of progress, ongoing challenges, and prospects for regional cooperation in the Western Balkans" (Western Balkans Summit, 2021). Publicity on the stocktaking made is required to accord the whole process the credits due and consider what comes next. Having dealt with issues such as CRM, Economic and investment Plan, Digital transformation, youth, Green agenda, security, reconciliation, migration, small arms and light weapons, response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Roma integration, missing persons, and civil society, participants reaffirmed the key role of the Berlin Process as a driver of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans within the wider context of the EU integration process and highlighted the role of the Berlin Process as a catalyst for economic integration, investment, and connectivity projects aimed at fostering reconciliation, security, growth, employment, and prosperity (Western Balkans Summit, 2021). Further, the document ends with participants' stressing 'the need for the continuation of the Berlin Process to harness the full potential of improved regional cooperation.'

This sounds like a statement for the sake of formally ending the conclusions. However, analyzing achievements and results along with arguments, objectives, strategies, and policy for proceeding with this process must justify doing so to expect the intended and desired results or hope for them.

4.5. A Snapshot of the Berlin Process Today – 'To Stay or Not To Stay'!

It is clearer and far more convenient to assess the Berlin Process performance from today's perspective and judge whether or not it has been and still is a success story. Following the agreement of actors to continue its implementation and given its objectives, the region's current landscape shows this process's impact and effectiveness. It somehow might help to better predict and project its future.

Actually, regarding bilateral issues as one of the main concerns for WB6, the initial five years witnessed some moments of positive signals attributed to this process. Concretely, the year 2018 marked a positive accomplishment in settlement of the long-lasting name dispute between Greece as an EU member state and North Macedonia. This milestone positively impacted their relations, achieving reconciliation, enhancing the spirit of cooperation, and supporting stability and security in the region and beyond.

The same goes for North Macedonia and Bulgaria in that same year. The signing of the 'Agreement for Friendship, Good Neighborly Relations and Cooperation' (European Western Balkans, 2018) between these two countries came as another milestone

that helped to resolve their problems, upgrade their relations, and give a good example of reconciliation and cooperation in light of the Berlin Process.

Nevertheless, resolving outstanding bilateral and internal issues, reconciliation, and enhanced economic cooperation are very complex, deep-seated, and time-demanding phenomena in the Balkans. Several open and latent disputes are out there. First is the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia. Despite efforts and steps taken, nothing was achieved to foster the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, which would lead to the latter's recognition. More so, Kosovo imposed a 100% tariff on goods from Serbia, which exacerbated their relations. Moreover, the pandemic and ensuing lockdown in 2020 worsened the overall picture in the entire region.

In light of engagement on this issue, a so-called 'informal discussion' was held on the initiative of French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel in April 2019, where Serbia and Kosovo agreed to continue with the talks to resolve their current disputes. However, no official meetings within the EU-mediated dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina took place in 2019 (European Western Balkans, 2019a). Unfortunately, no such meeting or even advancement in relations between the two has ever occurred. Meanwhile, Bosnia and Herzegovina blocked regional cooperation in trade-related matters and other areas. Also, the Law on Religious Freedoms in Montenegro led to a dispute erupting between Montenegro and Serbia.

In the internal realm, during the years subject to analysis, a decline of democracy in the economic aspect is noted. Also, one can note political polarization with opposition MPs in Albania and Serbia boycotting the parliament and leading to political instability; lack of trust and cooperation between the government and opposition; anti-government protests in Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia; problems arising from disagreements on electoral conditions in the three Balkan countries above, and stagnation for a year or so of the process regarding the nomination of the new Head of the Council of Ministers in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Within this regional setting, leaders of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia agreed by the end of 2019 on 'mini-Schengen' – a new initiative introducing "four freedoms" across the three countries - the freedom of moving goods, services, people, and capital – balked at the idea to create a Balkan version of the European Union's border-free Schengen area. Upon consensus of three out of six Balkan countries, this new initiative sparked too much debate. Someone questioned whether it heralds the new dawn of cooperation or is merely political theatre (Cipa, 2019). Another article questions whether the mini-Schengen initiative substitutes for the EU commitment lack, is a tool for creating a new Yugoslavia, or is shifting the focus away from

disappointment caused by the postponement of the opening of the EU accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia (Muminović, 2020). According to Hackaj, 'it is just an idea which to become a reality needs a strategy, an action plan, detailed objectives, measures, indicators, benchmarks, available financial resources and qualified staff' which this initiative already lacked. He further adds that we have those in CEFTA and RCC (Maksimović, 2020), which in fact, encompassed all the six Balkan countries.

A thorough analysis of this initiative (shortly after dubbed 'Open Balkan') belongs to another study. However, it is important to shed light on the conception, goal, objectives, and implementation of this initiative per se and vis-a-vis the Berlin Process, given the prospect of the EU integration dynamics of the Western Balkans, i.e., where is this new initiative leading the WB6? Will it go in parallel with BP? Is it overlapping or replacing it? Moreover, the reality across the region over the eight years of the Berlin Process performance presents a grim picture concerning the fulfillment of its original objectives, not to mention the 'Open Balkan' initiative and its complex related issues. At this phase, it is impossible to predict the future of the Berlin Process and its impact in the Western Balkans context and the EU's enlargement policy in this region. Therefore, it remains a challenge to further studies!

5. Conclusions

The Berlin Process, since 2014, aroused expectations in the Western Balkans and beyond as an initiative to make up for the EU's decision announcing its formally marginalized position towards enlargement policy in this region. Given the relevance and significance of this process, the primary aim of this study is to check whether the Berlin Process yielded novel and accelerated progress as an opportunity to upgrade the EU integration dynamics of the Western Balkans. This study's novelty is that the analysis of the Berlin Process encompasses, in an overarching approach, the 2014-2018 performance and its outcomes with the 2018 reloading of the process and its impact on the Western Balkans' path given the eventual EU integration of this region.

The results of this study show that the Berlin Process achieved little progress against the backdrop of its objectives. The primary success is that in the context of the EU making a break, this process kept the ship afloat - it served as a filler to make up for the EU's stray-off from the enlargement project. The analysis further shows that this process sought to bring a new spirit of acceptance, communication, reconciliation, and cooperation among WB countries, notably during the first phase of 2014-2018. However, consistent with earlier research (Fouéré & Blockmans, 2017; Vurmo, 2021), this study found that implementation of commitments and achievements of the Berlin Process remained a paper exercise lacking materialization on the

ground – one good in words but far away in deeds. The Berlin Process fell short of tackling the most pressing issues in these countries, namely, bilateral disputes and other outstanding issues, democracy, and rule of law; it produced no tangible benefits or results and no visible, real impact on civil society and youth engagement. The Western Balkan ownership and leadership required to carry on with the reforms in the areas concerned failed to match.

It was also found that the overall political, economic, and social context in the WB countries evidenced slow progress, weak democratic institutions, autocratic leadership, declining economic development, political instability, lack of future prospects for youth, all associated with inter-state divisions reflected in the emergence of the ‘Open Balkan’ initiative. EU support in the region was mainly financial, related to connectivity in transport and energy.

Unlike the existing literature, this study concludes that within this landscape, the agreement to extend the Berlin Process beyond 2018 came from the EU’s reluctance and inability to reset the enlargement agenda in this region rather than from the success of the Berlin Process by then, as contended by some.

As such, the Berlin Process has failed—to date, at least—to offer novel and accelerated progress as an opportunity to upgrade the EU integration dynamics of the WB countries. Moreover, the post-2018 performance of this process onwards confirms that. Still, the EU’s hands-off approach along with the WB’s incapacity for its role, is not the way to go. In this regard, this study aims to offer a modest contribution to the academic debate about the EU and WB through the Berlin Process and beyond to predict its future and work for its success.

In order for the Berlin Process to fulfill its objectives and prove successful, pressing actualization of the process is needed. Hence, it is strongly recommended that the EU should explicitly and proactively re-engage in the process. By resorting to a new policy and strategy, putting into place structured monitoring and checking mechanisms and indicators to take stock of the progress made and make recommendations on what lies ahead, a clear vision and perspective can be offered to WB countries regarding integration dynamics. It is further recommended that WB countries should deliver on commitments undertaken and be committed to forging reforms ahead. Otherwise, the Berlin Process will prove a disappointing mission with imminent consequences for the EU and WB.

6. Limitations and Further Study

This study has a few limitations. First, the lack of transparency, progress reports, and monitoring mechanisms on consecutive Western Balkans Summits (2014-2018) and events between them was a handicap to conducting an in-depth analysis of the Berlin Process

performance and measuring its success during the period concerned. Filling this gap in future studies remains a task of scholarly debate to conduct a meticulous analysis and follow-up on the process, implementation of commitments, and achievements given its continuity. Second, the rationale and political motivation behind 2018 reloading political discourse and relevant available data, primary and secondary sources, created a gap for this study to analyze the relation and impact of this process on the EU enlargement project and subsequent developments in the Western Balkans’ stage and predict the future of this process given the EU accession perspective of Western Balkan countries. We hope the findings and recommendations in this study may add to the inadequate academic literature and spark interest to further studies on the EU and Western Balkan integration.

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Authors’ Contributions

Etleva Babameto introduced the idea and framework of this research and conducted the data collection and analysis. Doriana Pano assisted in data collection and analysis and conducted proofreading of the paper.

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