

Résumé of the online event
held on 9 December 2021



Weimar Plus Working Discussion:

Re-engaging the Western Balkans – what goals, what tools?

The Western Balkans are part of the EU's strategic focus. However, two decades of accession policy have been no panacea. The six (potential) candidates – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia – have only achieved limited progress in terms of democratic and socio-economic convergence. Unresolved conflicts continue to put the EU integration process under strain, and external actors such as China and Russia have stepped up their game accordingly. In order to face these challenges and re-engage the region more strategically, the EU has refined its accession toolbox. A New Methodology was adopted in 2020, but some uncertainties remain regarding its implementation. Likewise, the future of the Berlin Process, which has been instrumental in fostering regional cooperation and raising the profile of the Western Balkans' EU integration, has yet to be defined.

At the invitation of the Genshagen Foundation and the Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe, decision-makers from Germany, France, Poland, Austria and the EU institutions, along with key analysts, met virtually on 9 December 2021 for an exchange of views on the future course of EU enlargement policy. The online event in the Weimar Plus format aimed to

foster an informal and interactive discussion on key challenges surrounding the Western Balkans' EU integration, taking into special consideration national sensitivities and the EU's reform agenda in general. The exchange, which took place under Chatham House rules, focused on two central questions: "How to make the most of the New Methodology?" and "What future for the Berlin Process?"

Panel I: How to make the most of the New Methodology?

The reform of the accession methodology, proposed by the European Commission and endorsed by the member states in spring 2020, was carried out with the intention of fostering a more effective, credible, predictable and dynamic accession process. Given the application of the New Methodology in all ongoing and future accession talks, it is crucial to follow through with its implementation, not only on paper, but also on the ground. Throughout the discussion, participants addressed several factors that could be conducive to a swift rollout of the New Methodology and an improvement to the abovementioned dimensions: a substantive reward and sanctions mechanism; the European Union keeping its word and speaking with one voice; and awareness of

the geostrategic and political dimension of the enlargement process. Moreover, a rethinking of member state status and the accession process as a whole might be in order.

1. The implementation of a substantive reward and sanctions mechanism is crucial for the New Methodology to be effective. The reform of the accession process has considerably increased the scope for action in this regard. It offers stronger incentives for accession candidates that meet the reform requirements, while accession talks can be (partially) suspended, benefits of closer integration withdrawn and funds withheld with states that take steps backwards, for example in the area of democracy and the rule of law. Participants highlighted the need for these provisions to find concrete application in the EU's future enlargement policy. Making the carrots tastier and the sticks more deterring than they currently are is key for further progress. Substantive rewards for complying with EU demands mean that the opportunity cost of not following the agreed reform agenda is much higher. Deploying the incentive mechanisms provided by the New Methodology, including accelerated integration and increased funding and investments, is therefore crucial for making the EU's approach more effective. On the other hand, imposing sanctions requires courage from both the European Commission and member states to clearly identify and call out backsliding and stalled reforms and draw the necessary conclusions.

2. It is vital for the European Union to keep its word and speak with one voice if it is to remain a credible negotiation partner. This is especially the case with regard to the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. EU-internal conflicts threaten to undermine its credibility with the political sphere and civil society not only of the two countries, but in the region as a whole, and are leading to a high level of frustration among citizens. More fundamentally, the reward mechanism stipulated by the New Methodology is taken to a level of absurdity

when candidate countries are prevented from making progress on their accession path despite their reform achievements.

- 3. Awareness of the political, societal and geostrategic nature** of the enlargement process should not be swept under the carpet. Much of the political debate on the part of the EU concerning the accession process revolves around – or is concealed behind? – matters of a technical nature, not taking into account the historical backdrop of the Western Balkans and the larger implications that deeper integration yields for the region. The greater political steer provided by the New Methodology could help to strengthen this awareness and place EU enlargement policy in the EU's broader strategic context.
- 4. Taking a long-term perspective, rethinking member state status and the accession process as a whole** might eradicate some causes of the current impasse(s). Transforming member state status from a binary (in or out) to a progressive mechanism (gradual accession and – in the case of non-compliance – a reversal thereof) would give rise to the possibility of a staged accession. The different stages would entail increasing involvement on the part of candidate countries in EU institutions as well as with growing structural funds. It should be noted that, albeit seemingly an attractive solution, this model is likely to be politically contentious and runs the risk of making the EU appear as if it is not keeping its accession promise or of being perceived as “second-class” membership.

Panel II: What future for the Berlin Process?

The three Weimar countries have all been supporters of the Berlin Process, founded in 2014 at the initiative of Angela Merkel. To date, the annual summits have been hosted by Germany (2014), Austria (2015), France (2016), Italy (2017), the United Kingdom (2018), Poland (2019) and Bulgaria (2020, jointly chairing with North Macedonia) with a focus on issues of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. Currently, the Berlin Process is in a phase of restructuring. A new formula remains to be defined, including with regard to its chair and members. A careful consideration of the available options, given the experience with and the achievements of the format, is in order. During the Weimar Plus Working Discussion, participants took stock of accomplishments to date and considered future directions.

1. It was widely agreed that **the Berlin Process has yielded a number of important results so far**. These include, for instance, the advancing connectivity agenda, efforts to create a common economic area, the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) modelled on the Franco-German Youth Office, and the abolition of roaming charges within the region.
2. **Regional cooperation is of utmost importance for the Western Balkans' EU integration process**. One can and should not be considered without the other. The benefits and lessons learned in the context of regional cooperation and integration as well as the harmonisation of rules and regulations prepare (potential) candidate countries for the accession process to the EU. Given the historical context and current conflictual political issues, however, the Western Balkan states are currently facing great difficulties in terms of moving in unison. This is especially the case with regard to the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo.
3. The relatively flexible intergovernmental framework of the Berlin Process is also important beyond EU integration. The process provides a **forum for maintaining high-level dialogue on political and economic issues** within the region, thus promoting long-term political and economic stability.
4. The agenda of the Berlin Process has been shaped to date by the member state holding the chairmanship of the annual meeting. In a new cycle, **sufficient scope should be accorded to candidate countries for making contributions to the agenda**. This would foster a sense of ownership and shared responsibility among the countries of the region, which, in turn, could lead to improved compliance within the framework of EU enlargement.
5. The Berlin Process would be well served by **providing an open door to all member states and other potential partners who are willing to engage**. The relative informal importance of the Berlin Process in the EU's enlargement policy makes it a key soft power tool for the Union. If member states or relevant third parties are able to contribute in a productive manner, ignoring them would be a wasteful management of capacities. The same is true of the involvement of civil society, which has already benefitted as a result of the process, but its role should be strengthened further and more systematically.

The Weimar Plus Series on the Western Balkans

This event was part of the Weimar Plus Series on the Western Balkans, an initiative aimed at intensifying exchanges on EU enlargement among decision-makers and experts from France, Germany, Poland, Austria, EU institutions and South East Europe. In November and December 2020, a group of experts reflected on the impact of the coronavirus crisis on EU enlargement policy. Their main findings and recommendations can be found in the policy brief [“Bringing citizens into the fold – making EU enlargement work in the \(post\) Covid-19 world”](#). In the policy study [“Towards more cohesion in EU enlargement policy – tapping the potential of the Weimar Triangle”](#), released in March 2021, Florent Marciacq and Tomasz Zornaczuk undertake an in-depth analysis of the role played by France, Germany and Poland in the Western Balkans, providing a blueprint with ten possible fields for enhanced engagement on the part of the Weimar Triangle. The Weimar Plus Working Discussion “Re-engaging the Western Balkans – what goals, what tools?” held on 9 December 2021 built on these findings and further explored how the EU strategy towards the Western Balkans can translate into concrete action.

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