

REGIONAL COOPERATION AND GOOD NEIGHBOURLY RELATIONS

Factsheet



February 2024

The Balkans Policy Research Group (Balkans Group) has pioneered initiatives aimed at fostering regional cooperation and resolving bilateral disputes in the Western Balkans. This is essential as it aims to build a peaceful, stable, and prosperous future for the region, encouraging dialogue and collaboration among nations.

Within the Regional Cooperation as its core strategic pillar, the Balkans Group seeks to bridge divides, promote mutual understanding, and facilitate the integration of Western Balkan countries into the European Union, aligning with broader international efforts to ensure security, economic development, and respect for democratic values and human rights in the region.

Regional Cooperation has become a key agenda for all six Western Balkans countries aspiring to join the EU. Launched in 2014, the Berlin Process initially fostered regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, bringing leaders together and facilitating infrastructure projects, digital initiatives, and a free-roaming area. Despite the limitations of this initiative, it offers many opportunities, such as the Connectivity Agenda, which aims to link Western Balkans countries with each other and with the EU through infrastructure policy.

To advance Regional Cooperation, the Western Balkans must resolve bilateral disputes and foster better relations among themselves, as the main prerequisite for progress. In addition, implementation capacities will need to be improved and regional cooperation will need to be higher on the policy agenda for the governments of Western Balkans countries. Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans faces several challenges, including political disagreements among the countries in the region, the complexity of their relationships, and the varying degrees of enthusiasm for EU integration.

Additionally, there is a need for more inclusive participation in regional initiatives, moving beyond mere political declarations to the actual implementation of policies and projects that benefit all involved. These problems highlight the importance of sustained effort and collaboration to overcome obstacles and achieve the goals of regional cooperation and integration into the European Union. However, the EU's new Growth Plan offers financial aid and incentives for reforms in the Western Balkans, aiming to speed up their economies and EU integration. To help, the WB6 should prioritise key reforms and use the provided resources effectively, while the EU can ensure transparent conditions and streamline the accession process.

Supporting Berlin Process Initiatives and Agendas

Balkans Group understands that the region's key challenges are intrinsically tied to the EU integration process and thus actively promotes meaningful dialogue and collaboration to foster the integration of minorities, societal harmony, and peaceful relations within the Western Balkans, aligning with the Berlin Process's goals of regional stability, economic development, and EU integration. Specifically, by engaging in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue and other regional discussions, the program aims to resolve bilateral disputes, support sustainable community integration, enhance interethnic relations, and advance peace and dialogue throughout the region.

This synergy reflects a shared commitment to peace, prosperity, and closer European integration, underpinning both the Berlin Process's and Balkans Group's efforts towards comprehensive regional development and integration, in alignment with EU integration efforts to improve governance, resolve disputes, and promote regional cooperation for stability and prosperity.

Our unwavering dedication to advancing regional cooperation is highlighted by our engagement in discussions on this vital topic, invited by many regional cooperation-focused initiatives and organisations. This acknowledgment showcases our role in advocating for enhanced dialogue and cooperation, underscoring our efforts toward creating a more connected and harmonious region. Since the launch of the Berlin Process in 2014, the Balkans Group has been at the forefront of promoting regional cooperation. BPRG has participated in and contributed to Berlin Process events, including the high-level meeting with foreign ministers. We also actively facilitated dialogue between WB6 Governments and civil society on the Berlin Process agendas, as well as taking part in Civil Society & Think Tank Forums.

14 policy papers
15 Advocacy Activities
6 high-level conferences
6 workshops
4 reporting forms
1 digital campaign



This leadership has positioned us to work closely with all Western Balkan governments, institutions, and agencies involved in regional efforts. A notable instance of our engagement is the invitation to share insights from our policy paper on Re-launching the Berlin Process at the Berlin Summit, in Belgrade and Skopje.

As part of the Berlin Process Summit 2024 activities, the Balkans Group, in partnership with the Southeast Europe Association and the Aspen Institute Germany, hosted in Berlin an advocacy roundtable with SHERPAs, representatives of the Western Balkan countries, and civil society organizations.

This high-level roundtable brought together government officials, Special Envoys for WB of Germany and Norway, and civil society organizations to discuss and debate the findings and recommendations that emerged from the Civil Society Preparatory Forum (CSF) held in July 2024. Chairs of CSF Working groups presented their recommendations on the following topics:

- EU Integration and the Berlin Process
- Dealing with the Past and Reconciliation
- Gender and Diversity
- Common Regional Market and Mobility
- Energy, Climate Change, and Decarbonization
- Environment Protection and Sustainable Economic Development
- Disinformation and Cyber Threats

Balkans Group actively supports all initiatives stemming from the Berlin Process, with a particular emphasis on supporting the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), and the Western Balkans Fund (WBF), through its specialised expertise and dedicated advocacy efforts.



As a testament to our ongoing commitment to enhancing regional cooperation, we were invited by the RYCO

Governing Board to contribute a Brief on Regional Cooperation. Such invitations, along with others of a similar nature, highlight our recognised role and dedication to fostering cooperation across the region, underscoring the Balkans Group's influence and contributions towards building a more interconnected and cooperative Western Balkans.

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In addressing Members of the European Parliament (AFET and LIBE Committees) on 'Beyond Accession: Irreversibility of the Rule of Law,' Naim Rashiti highlighted challenges that threaten the irreversibility of the Rule of Law in the Western Balkans.



Campaign to Promote Regional Cooperation

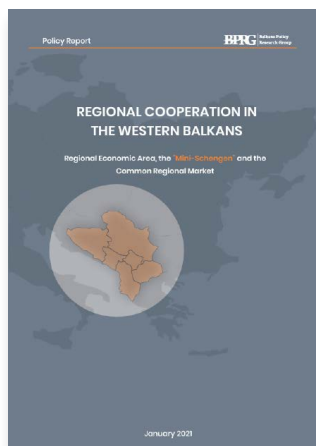


BPRG's campaign, titled "Each Capital has a story! Let's visit them!" emphasizes freedom of movement within the Western Balkans, highlighting agreements related to the recognition of ID cards, diplomas, and professional certificates.

The goal of this campaign was to advocate and raise awareness on good neighbourly relations, promote the rights of citizens within the WB6 countries to move freely, increase cross-border cooperation, enable security and stability to citizens, and allow free trade markets, which would bring investments and growth to all the countries. It aimed to promote the countries of the Western Balkans, the amazing diverse culture and tradition, unrivalled nature potential, history riddles, beautiful architecture, and the characterization of each country.

With evolving EU agendas for the Western Balkans, focusing on resolving bilateral disputes and aligning the countries of the region with the EU’s single market, the Balkans Group seeks to intensify its efforts in the region by mobilising all like-minded actors to promote cooperation, cohesion, mobility, and the resolution of bilateral disputes, as well as finding practical solutions supporting Kosovo in regional organisations, and facilitating the region’s approximation to the EU.

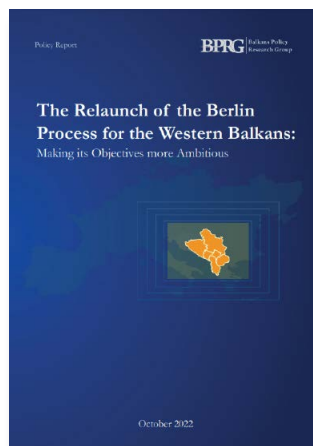
Balkans Group’s work on Regional Cooperation included a series of unmatched publications providing insightful policy analyses and recommendations on key regional issues. These publications demonstrate BPRG’s rigorous research standards and dedication to promoting informed decision-making. Topics cover a range of issues, including the Regional Economic Area, the Berlin Process, and Kosovo’s representation in regional organizations.



Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans



Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans – An overview of the Regional Economic Area and the “mini-Schengen”



The Relaunch of the Berlin Process for the Western Balkans: Making its Objectives more Ambitious



The Berlin Process for the Western Balkans: Gains and Challenges for Kosovo

Advocacy efforts for regional cooperation in the Western Balkans were undertaken through a series of strategic meetings, initiatives, and high-level conferences fostering collaboration and dialogue among stakeholders in the region.



The **Western Balkans Policy Forum**, a key component of BPRG’s initiatives, provides a platform for fostering Regional Cooperation and facilitating meaningful engagement within the Western Balkans. Through this platform, BPRG actively promotes collaborative solutions and advances shared objectives for the region’s development and stability.

Some high-level conferences, worth noting under the Western Balkans Policy Forum were - the Balkan Dialogues Initiative Conference, Dialogue with Serbia: Lessons from the Past for the Future of the Process, Twenty Years After: Perspectives and Challenges for the Western Balkans.



Balkan Dialogues Conference



Dialogue with Serbia: Lessons from the Past for the Future of the Process



Perspectives and Challenges for the Western Balkan

Western Balkans Energy Security Hub

Balkans Group has broadened its focus to include energy security in the Western Balkans within the context of regional cooperation. We are currently in the process of finalizing six papers, each dedicated to one country and an additional paper that comprehensively addresses the overall energy security situation in the entire Western Balkans region. All these papers are developed by partnering with experts and think tanks from 6 countries of the Western Balkans.

Balkans Group remains dedicated to addressing the energy security challenges in the Western Balkans by introducing a new initiative, the **Western Balkans Energy Hub**. Through this platform, we will organize a series of high-level regional advocacy events to promote energy security matters.



Enhance Kosovo's Participation in Regional Initiatives and Programs

In 2021, the Balkans Group increased efforts to enhance inter institutional cooperation and policy preparations for regional initiatives and agenda. Working closely with the Office of the Prime Minister, SHERPA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Department of Regional Relations, and other ministries, we aimed to strengthen Kosovo's role in regional cooperation. Furthermore, the Balkans Group contributed through the expert support component. BPRG's expert working in the Prime Minister's Office coordinated the Core Team's efforts to negotiate with the European Commission and prepare the Reform Agenda (2024–2027) under the EU's Growth and Reform Facility. In cooperation with the Office of the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, we organized a workshop to synchronize the Action Plan (2025–2028) for the Common Regional Market (CRM) with Kosovo's Reform Agenda (2024–2027).

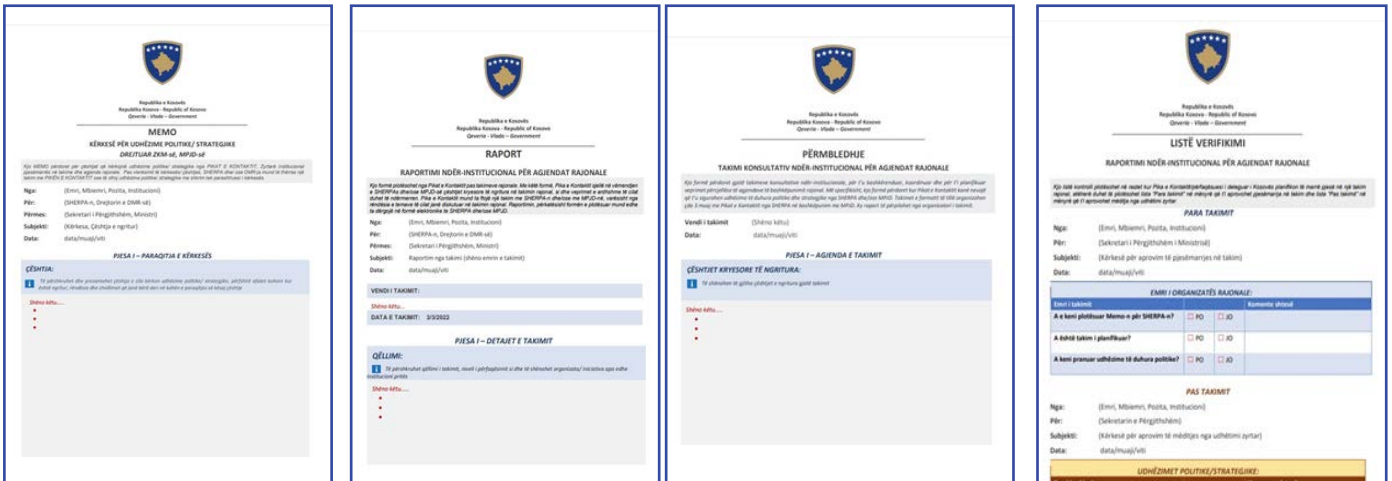


Key outcomes include:

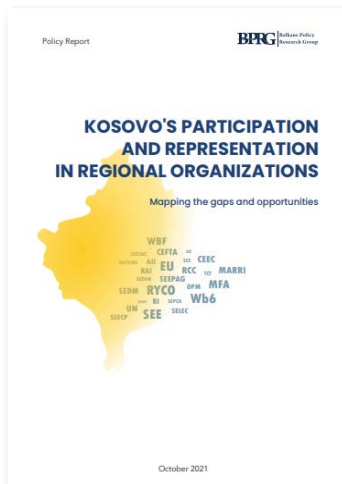
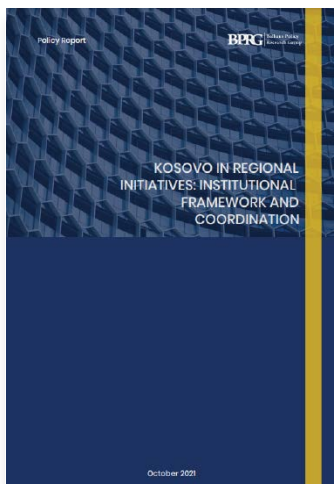
- High-level conferences addressing Kosovo's participation and membership in regional organizations.
- Support for working groups and contact points to tackle key thematic issues in regional cooperation, including youth, transport, trade, energy, and security, and creation of a shared calendar to track upcoming regional meetings, enhancing planning and coordination.



- Adoption of uniform reporting forms for inter-institutional consultation, reporting, and monitoring prior to regional meetings and conferences.



Balkans Group identified the need to place “regional cooperation” higher on the policy agenda. We published several reports addressing key challenges and actions to enhance Kosovo’s role in regional cooperation:



Partners

Our partnership approach extends across regions and borders, uniting us with reputable organizations to collectively address challenges, promote cooperation, and contribute to positive societal change. We have engaged with over 20 regional organizations and 15 European and International NGOs and think tanks to implement the activities of our program on Regional Cooperation and Good Neighborly Relations.

These partnerships empower us to engage broadly, exchange ideas, and formulate policy options to achieve our objectives for a peaceful, and more prosperous region.

The Balkans Policy Research Group is an independent, regional think-tank based in Prishtina, Kosovo. We provide timely policy analysis and recommendations on a wide array of state-building issues; institutional and democratic consolidation; minority integration and good neighbourly relations; European integration and policy change. We have decades of experience in policy reporting and development, strategic thinking, and advocacy with governmental, international, and non-governmental organisations.

Our rigorous, detailed, impartial reporting, always based on in-depth fieldwork, is the core of our work. We go beyond mainstream positions and seek to make change through creative, feasible, well-measured, and forward-looking policy recommendations to help develop strong, vibrant democracies, prosperous states, and societies based on the rule of law in the Western Balkans.

We engage in high-level advocacy, domestically, regionally, and internationally, impacting policy discussions and options with regard to the home affairs and European policies toward the Western Balkans.

Balkans Group has developed other tools and platforms to achieve this change:

The Expert Support Component provides policy support and experts to the governments and other key institutions on vital policy areas, including dialogue and negotiations, security, foreign policy, regional cooperation, EU agendas and reforms, good governance, development, and law-making.

Youth in Politics Programme aims to train and build the capacity of young people active in political parties in Kosovo in areas such as the rule of law, public policy, good governance, economic development and social policy, education policy, and regional cooperation.

The Women in Politics & Decision Making platform aims to create a gender-equal environment by increasing the representation of women in politics and decision-making roles across institutions.

The Western Balkans Policy Forum - a Think-Tankers High-level Advocacy Forum, is committed to enhancing the dialogue between civil society and institutions.

The Policy Dialogue promotes domestic dialogue in Kosovo, political consensus, and reform agendas.

The Dialogue Platform promotes the dialogue process between Kosovo and Serbia, by informing the wider public and generating debate about the agreements, benefits, and challenges of the Dialogue.

The Kosovo Serbia Policy Advocacy Group - a Cross-Border Civil Society Cooperation forum- aims to communicate, promote, and enhance dialogue toward full normalization between Kosovo and Serbia and their societies.

Constitutional Framework, Parliamentarism, and Membership to the CoE, aims to advocate for comprehensive reforms in Kosovo's constitutional framework, improvement of parliamentary procedures, and integration into the Council of Europe.

Energy, Green & Digital Policy Hub aims to bring together government officials, experts, and think tanks to jointly devise, develop, and advocate for the right solutions.

The Policy Idea Lab platform aims to create new policy tools and spaces where policymakers, members of institutions, advisors, experts, the CSO community, academics, etc., can share their knowledge, debate policy processes and topics, and devise solutions.