

THE KVINNA TILL KVINNA FOUNDATION

MISSING GENDER PERSPECTIVES IN THE BERLIN PROCESS

CONSEQUENCES & NEW OPPORTUNITIES

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THE KVINNA TILL KVINNA FOUNDATION

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has defended women's rights since 1993. For every woman's right to be safe and to be heard. Today we are one of the world's leading women's rights organisations, working directly in areas affected by war and conflict to strengthen women's influence and power. We work closely together with over 100 local partner organisations across 20 countries to end violence against women, reach lasting peace and close the gender gap once and for all.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CSO	Civil society organisations
CSF	Civil Society Forum
EC	European Commission
EIP	Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans
EU	European Union
GAP III	Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in External Action 2021–2025
IPA III	Instrument for pre-accession assistance III
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex and other sexualities and/or gender expressions
MP	Member of parliament
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office
TTF	Think Tank Founm
WCOSs	Women's civil society organisations
WPS AGENDA	Women peace and security agenda

GLOSSARY

Gender: refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men.

Gender-mainstreaming: the systematic consideration of the differences between the conditions, situations and needs of women and men in all policies and actions.

Gender-based violence: shall mean violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman, or that affects women disproportionately.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Berlin Process was initiated by the German government under chancellor Angela Merkel in 2014 to provide new momentum for EU integration of Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) at times of “enlargement fatigue” within the EU. The vision of the Berlin Process emphasised regional cooperation and development, reconciliation, and democratisation of the countries in preparation for their eventual accession to the EU.

Social and democratic change in the Western Balkans is much needed. **Local women civil society organisations (WCSOs) have highlighted challenges to gender equality in the Western Balkans on a variety of issues**, including but not limited to gender-based violence and hate speech, barriers to women’s political participation and decision-making, gender stereotyping and traditional gender roles, and discrimination in the labour market. Gender equality is imperative for sustainable social and democratic transformation and as such must be recognised as an all-encompassing priority for reform. However, in the Berlin Process, a gender perspective is largely absent. **This missing gender perspective relates to the content and output of the Process, to questions of representation and participation and to the way how the Process is structured.**

The integration of a gender perspective in discussing different subjects of the Berlin Process is very limited. Where applicable, gender is understood in a narrow way and focused on women’s empowerment, particularly in relation to labour market activity. Recognition of structural barriers to achieving gender equality and hence a cross-cutting, and systematic ambition to apply a gender perspective is missing. Social norms, a lack of political will and a lack of gender knowledge obstruct gender concerns from being taken seriously when discussed outside designated working groups on gender.

Gender equality is treated as a singular topic, not as a horizontal issue applying to different working groups and formats equally.

Within the Berlin Process, there are no legislations, mechanisms or strategies specifically de-

veloped to allow for a systematic approach to gender mainstreaming. Because gender equality is not understood as a structural issue, potential barriers to achieving equality (i.e. social norms, institutional barriers etc.) are only referenced in (limited) expert contributions from civil society, but are not on the policy agenda of the Process.

The 2018 Declaration on war crimes condemns conflict-related sexual violence, however without reference to the Women Peace and Security agenda (WPS Agenda). Equally, none of the official outputs reference relevant EU documents or strategies such as GAP III.

In terms of representation, participation in ministerial meetings and head of government summits relies on positions in government which are dominated by men. **The inclusion of parliamentarians** is uneven and without meaningful gender perspective.

The Berlin Process has provided opportunities for civil society advocates and think tank researchers, many of whom are women, to interact with decision-makers. Civil Society formats are well-established and successful. In the Civil Society Forum (CSF)/Think Tank Forum (TTF) as well as RYCO activities, gender parity in working groups, on panels etc. is desired, but without structured mechanisms to ensure (and monitor) gender equal representation. Representation of WCSOs or other civil society organisations (CSOs) working on and with marginalised groups is not streamlined nor monitored in the process. WCSOs particularly have criticised the process for a lack of accessibility and possibility to impact agenda-setting and output. This also relates to a lack of recognition of gender as a useful and important cross-cutting element of discussion.

In terms of structure, **the Process is loosely structured and there is limited institutional continuity from one year to the next.** The subject matter of the Process is technical and often requires specialised expertise which makes it difficult for local CSOs to contribute.

The rise of anti-gender movements has happened alongside the Berlin Process and in junction with nationalist and authoritarian narratives seriously undermining democratic progress in the region, yet its detrimental impact remains unrecognised by the majority of Process participants. **High levels of violence, especially gender-based violence, threaten the rights, livelihoods and opportunities of women and marginalised groups and pose a serious, yet insufficiently recognised challenge to the aims of the Berlin Process.**

At the level of content, participation and procedural structure, attention to intersectionality is not visible, neither in relation to formalised issues like Youth and Roma integration, nor pressing concerns like migration, security issues or reconciliation. Reference to Roma Integration (without gender specific focus) has increased steadily and is institutionally formalised. The rights and concerns of LGBTQI+ persons as well as of persons with disabilities, are missing from the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Across different formats of the Berlin Process, gender needs to be recognised as a crosscutting category**, together with intersectionality, to be considered as a horizontal issue.
- 2. The organisation of a gender side event by the respective host country should be continued annually**, while at the same time ensuring that gender perspectives are not dealt with in siloed working groups and events only.
- 3. A systematic approach to include gender perspectives through gender mainstreaming guidelines should be developed.** These guidelines will serve as a tool for the inclusion of a gender perspective in the Berlin Process, in reference to GAP III as well as the WPS Agenda, using gender analysis and other relevant methodologies. These guidelines are to be developed in line with input from civil society actors, WCSOs and gender equality experts as part of the Berlin Process event cycle.
 - Importantly, **anti-gender as well as populist movements and their detrimental impact on the aims of the Berlin Process need to be considered.**
 - **The urgency of addressing high levels of violence, especially gender-based violence**, lack of access to justice and the threat that this poses to the wellbeing and participation of women and to society at large needs to be recognised.
- 4. Gender mainstreaming guidelines should be complemented by tangible measures which are to be monitored regularly**, including goals for gender representation across different forums, inclusion of gender advisers, structures for consultation with diverse CSOs & gender experts, as well as commitment to advancing gender equality in the Berlin Process. The details of these measures should be developed in consultation with WCSOs.
- 5. Host governments/host organisations should enable various formats throughout the years for direct consultation and cooperation between ministries and civil society, with specific attention to WCSOs and gender experts.**
- 6. Policy-makers should include gender in the Declaration on Roma Integration** to provide an intersectional perspective.

BRINGING THE WESTERN BALKANS CLOSER TO THE EU: EU ENLARGEMENT AND THE BERLIN PROCESS

Initiated in 2014 by the German government, the Berlin Process was designed to support the Western Balkans on their “path to a future in Europe” and promised that “[a]ll of the countries of the Western Balkans will have an opportunity to join the EU if they meet the conditions for accession”¹ at times of high “enlargement fatigue” among EU member states. The Berlin Process is a multi-lateral, diplomatic initiative and a platform for high-level cooperation between government representatives of the six Western Balkan countries and EU member state participants (Germany as well as Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovenia and the United Kingdom) with changing chairpersonship. It follows a loose structure with recurring events organised by best practice without formal rules of procedure and according to the priorities of the host country. Besides annual summits of heads of governments, high-level representatives of governments, the EU and financial institutions, sectoral ministerial meetings are happening throughout the year in addition to different side events like the CSF, Youth Forum or Business Forum. The main formal outcome of the Berlin process are annual Summit Conclusions, their content prepared and discussed during the above mentioned events throughout the year. Furthermore, the Process produces Declarations and has also enabled the foundation of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office for the Western Balkans (RYCO).

The Berlin Process’s loose structure means that it lacks the formalised elements and monitoring mechanisms of the EU enlargement process and that there is little continuity between consecutive hosts – this is particularly true for the organisers of the CSF. **Agenda setting often depends on national priorities** of host countries. In the case of Germany, WCSOs had expressed hopes for a more pronounced gender perspective after its declaration of Feminist



Foreign Policy, but the years 2021 and 2022 – hosted by Germany – did not meet those expectations. In 2024, a Gender Equality Forum is organised for the first time under German chairpersonship.

The Civil Society Forum (since 2019 also Think Tank Forum) has been organised annually since the Vienna Summit to prepare recommendations presented to government representatives. The CSF format has enabled civil society an opportunity to meet alongside ministers and heads of government and to directly communicate ideas and recommendations to them in a regular structured manner.

As a mechanism to raise visibility of and support for enlargement and regional cooperation, and to communicate priorities from the region to the EU the Berlin Process can be credited, 10 years on, with some success. The attention given now in the European Commission (EC) to the connectivity agenda of the Western Balkans is one example to show that the events of the Berlin Process can give visibility and urgency to an issue. A potential also for the cross-cutting issue of gender equality.

¹ Final Declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans, August 2014, https://www.berlinprocess.de/uploads/documents/chairs-final-declaration-2014_1714043796.pdf.

Gender in European Enlargement

The EU has a long history of advancing gender equality legislation across Europe, enshrined in its Treaties with the “aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality, between men and women”². **Gender Mainstreaming was first introduced in the EU in 1996 as a guideline and strategic compass for all its activities** and encompasses “the integration of a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, regulatory measures and spending programmes, with a view to promoting equality between women and men, and combating discrimination.”³ However, suffering from a lack of formalisation and clear guidance, the once path-breaking principle has become associated with a blurred and non-committed approach, rather than reliably contributing to dismantle unequal societal, political and economic structures. Incoherence in the EU’s gender regime has been found between the commitment to being a global gender actor as expressed in the Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in External Action 2021–2025 (GAP III)⁴ or the ambition of the European Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security and political realities in External Action⁵.

Nonetheless, for women’s rights and gender equality advocates, the far-reaching legislative commitment of the EU provides leverage for their claims. WCSOs from the Western Balkans continue to utilise this framework to lobby their causes.

WCSOs’ advocacy for a more structural inclusion of GAP III provisions in the process of EU enlargement succeeded to strengthen the importance allocated to gender equality in the IPA III (2021–2027) regulation. In direct reference to relevant



documents such as GAP III and WPS Agenda, IPA III now commits to gender mainstreaming, thus intending to “be guided by the principles of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, and [...] to protect and promote women’s and girls’ rights”⁶. Nonetheless, the lack of recognising intersectional discrimination, of providing specific indicators or measures for gender equality and an overall weak language, point to some areas in need of further improvement⁷. Despite some improvements in past years, the **implementation and its monitoring of a horizontal application of gender equality legislation, or gender mainstreaming, in negotiating EU accession of candidate states remains uneven**. The attention given to women and girls and/or gender aspects in different negotiating chapters is slowly improving, **but a key criticism still relates to the lack of gender mainstreaming across all chapters of the negotiating framework or other forms of formal institutionalisation of gender equality efforts**⁸.

² Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (2012). Official Journal of the European Union. Article 8

³ European Institute for Gender Equality, What is gender mainstreaming, <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/what-is-gender-mainstreaming>.

⁴ Gender Action Plan III. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-01/join-2020-17-final_en.pdf

⁵ Chappell, L., & Guerrina, R. (2020). Understanding the gender regime in the European External Action Service. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 55(2), 261–280.

⁶ Paragraph (27) of Regulation (EU) 2021/1529 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 September 2021 establishing the Instrument for Pre-Accession assistance (IPA III), September 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R1529>. ⁴ Gender Action Plan III. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-01/join-2020-17-final_en.pdf

⁷ The Coalition for Gender Equality in the European Union (EU) Accession Process (EQUAPRO), IPA III: Missed and Remaining Opportunities for Furthering Gender Equality, 2021, <https://womensnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/IPA-III-Lost-Opportunities-1.pdf>.

⁸ The Kvinna Till Kvinna Foundation, A low hanging fruit: Gender Analysis of the 2023 European Commission Country Reports for the Western Balkans, 2024, <https://kvinna-till-kvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/The-Kvinna-till-Kvinna-Foundation-Gender-analysis-of-the-2023-European-Commission-Country-reports-for-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>.

Traditionally, economic harmonisation and market integration has been a key component of European integration, and an area of far-reaching EU competences. Therefore, in domains where the EU holds more harmonised competence, such as labour market regulation, more legislative provisions concerning gender (in)equality exist, with implementation being monitored by EU institutions. This is reflected in EU enlargement: gender equality directives (most of which relate to non-discrimination in employment or the labour market) are part of the legally binding *acquis communautaire* which candidate states are required to transpose into national law. Alongside commitment to a “fundamentals first” approach in the current enlargement methodology, economic growth and cooperation remain main pillars of the EU’s engagement. Most recently, the EU adopted Directive 2024/1385, a crucial step for legal harmonisation of a “comprehensive framework to effectively prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence through the Union”⁹, path-breaking also for its recognition of intersectionality. **In areas where intergovernmental decision-making structures, thus national interests, dominate, gender awareness is often harder to find. This is also reflected in the Berlin Process.**

Looking for Gender in the Berlin Process

Gender, socially constructed in polar-opposite categories of men and women, to a large extent still define social status, behaviour and opportunities of individuals and the groups they belong to. Gender stereotyping and traditional gender roles restrict individual choice and freedom, as well as opportunities to contribute to the social, political and economic life. Looking at gender draws attention to the different ways in which men and women are impacted by political decisions, or the absence of policies. Gender perspectives draw attention to relations between different groups in society or political groups, and the power they hold. It matters how policies or social conditions affect different groups in a society. It matters who is involved, and how, and it matters, how a political process is structured and legitimised.

Including a gender perspective in the context of the Berlin Process is therefore an important element to guarantee its contribution to democratic, just and egalitarian development.

Assessing the Berlin Process through a gender lens brings out sobering results: with the notable exception of the 2018 summit in London (and this year’s forthcoming programme, especially the Gender Equality Forum in September 2024), **gender issues and women’s concerns have been missing for most parts** in the final summit declarations/ conclusions, as well as policy recommendations produced in various working groups during the CSF and preparatory meetings. The inclusion of civil society/ Think Tank representatives has been criticised for a lack of transparency and accessibility, particularly from WCSOs. In 2019, the Declaration of Western Balkan Partners on Roma Integration within the EU enlargement process was adopted during the Poznan Summit and has since been endorsed each year. The declaration itself misses the opportunity to include and highlight Roma women who are faced with additional challenges in the region.

Recognising gender does not mean to de-prioritise any of the given, and pressing, policy fields, but to expand focus to social and power relations, thus ensuring sustainable, just and equal transformation. In this process, gender focuses on men as much as on women – and policies and processes aimed at impactful political change need to consider, and be championed by, both genders (in addition to the interests and needs of gender minorities). Furthermore, gender equality can only substantiate if issues of discrimination, inclusion and equality are recognised as horizontal issues in structures and content of the process.

Why does Gender matter in the domains of the Berlin process?

The Western Balkan countries are transitioning countries. Key issues for societal, political and economic transformation include, but are not limited to, thin democratic structures and democratic backsliding, state and societal capture, lack of rule

⁹ Directive (EU) 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council of May 14 2024 on Combating Violence Against Women And Domestic Violence, May 2024, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=OJ:L_202401385.

of law structures and a hollowed justice system, corruption, shrinking spaces for civil society and political polarisation. The countries experience economic and financial difficulties, high levels of unemployment and massive brain drain. Bilateral issues and unresolved grievances as well as ethnic tensions impact bilateral relations, as well as social relations. Traditional gender roles and patriarchal family structures and mindsets prevail and are strongly intertwined with nationalist sentiments. European integration has long been a priority for the region and a desired future path for citizens of the Western Balkans, but public support for EU membership has been declining in recent years¹⁰.

Women make up about 50% of any society. In the countries of the Western Balkans, they carry the main burden of care and reproductive labour, which is heavy in countries with thin welfare systems and lack of state support. At the same time, women are less likely than men to be employed in formal employment.

The absence of a fully functioning rule of law and access to justice is felt most strongly by those most frequently, and most structurally, threatened by violence: marginalised groups. This prominently includes women, but also ethnic, national, sexual or other gender minorities, poor people or migrants. Gender-based violence is a pressing issue across the Western Balkans and the lack of support structures and weak implementation of legislation is felt particularly strongly by victims/survivors of gender-based violence, who struggle to attain access to justice. The undermining of rule of law, and little to no access to justice, becomes an often life-threatening concern to their everyday activities and compromises their quality of life, and consequently their ability to contribute to a strong and flourishing economy and democracy.

Additionally, **democracy in the Western Balkans is increasingly undermined by a well-organised and growing anti-gender movement with direct links to nationalist groups or parties.** Besides direct attacks against women's rights and the

rights of LGBTQI+ persons and those who work to uphold them, anti-gender actors mobilise against reproductive rights and health, and for "traditional" family models, mixing ultra-conservative values with a nationalist, EU-sceptic agenda and an authoritarian vision of politics.¹¹ Like this, attacks against gender equality and women's rights, become inevitably intertwined with democratic backlash, threats to domestic security and the overall wellbeing of society. High levels of violence, hate speech and populist discourse further impede the Process's overarching goal of reconciliation. Traditionally, women's activism has played a major role in reconciliation, peace building and democratisation across the region from the 1990s onwards. In the Balkans, WCSOs, groups and networks were the first to cross conflict divides, working jointly to promote peace and women's equal participation. WCSOs have provided safe spaces for victims of sexual and gender-based violence, helping survivors address their trauma and access justice. Sustainable peace relies on a strong and engaged diverse civil society and their contribution to pluralistic democracy. To this day, most of the peace and reconciliation work is carried out by women's organisations who often have to defend the relevance of their work.

In addition, economic development, national and regional security, green transformation, reconciliation etc. all depend on equal opportunities and gender equality, considering the rights and needs of both women and men.

¹⁰ Regional Cooperation Council, Balkan Barometer Public Opinion 2023, 2024, <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/168/balkan-barometer-public-opinion-2023>.

¹¹ The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, Hope and resistance go together - the state of women human rights defenders 2023, 2023, <https://kvinna-tillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/The-Kvinna-till-Kvinna-Foundation-The-state-of-women-human-rights-defenders-2023.pdf>

GENDER ANALYSIS OF THE BERLIN PROCESS

A gender perspective for analysing a political process has different dimensions. It can be used as an analytical tool to assess **who is included in the process**, to evaluate **how inclusive processes are and why**, and to shed attention to the **subjects discussed, and not discussed, and the extent to which gender is considered across different fields**. In a next step, a gender perspective can **provide guidelines how to increase equality and mainstream gender** into different policy fields. Recognising gender denotes a shift from focusing solely on women as an isolated social group; instead it opens the door to a structural approach of power relations between men and women in a society or political system. It also enables space to consider experiences of intersectional discrimination or marginalisation.

The overarching goal of the Berlin Process is regional cooperation, democratisation and economic development to reach a European standard, fit for EU membership. **Just and equal societies are pre-conditions for democratic and prosperous states and as such, gender equality should be a priority for anyone seriously interested in transformative change.**

This assessment has found that gender and matters of (in)equality attract little attention in the Berlin Process and are not recognised as cross-cutting issues relating to each of these challenges, diverse representation is not mandated for different forums nor possible in government meetings.



What

Gender awareness in the subjects discussed

The declared goals of the Berlin Process are the (1) Resolution of outstanding bilateral and internal issues, (2) Reconciliation within and between societies in the region, (3) the enhancing of regional economic cooperation and to (4) lay the foundation for sustainable growth, all within the bigger vision of preparing the region for EU membership. In line with EU Enlargement Methodology that foresees a strong transformational element in the preparation of candidate states for EU accession, the Berlin Process must be understood as an additional tool developed to support societal, political and economic change.

RECONCILIATION AND GOOD NEIGHBOURLY RELATIONS

Especially in earlier years, the Berlin Process contributed to the normalisation of relations between governments in the region and bore witness to advances in good neighbourly relations. The final conclusions of the London Summit 2018 focused on the declarations on good neighbourly relations,

on missing persons and on war crimes. The latter importantly included reference to conflict-related sexual violence, urged to address “stigma resulting from conflict-related sexual violence” and rejected “narratives of victim-blaming and other discriminatory treatment”¹². However, how this has been followed-up on, or continues to be on the agenda of policy-makers, is unclear and hard to monitor.

That same year, WCSOs welcomed “the endorsement of the Roadmap for a sustainable solution to the illegal possession, misuse and trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons and their ammunition in the Western Balkans, which has specific importance for preventing violence, including gender-based violence, and advancing gender equality”¹³. Even though WCSOs always have, and still do, play a vital role in collaboration and reconciliatory activism across the region, they observe a lack of consultation and find their arguments largely missing from discussions, leading to incomplete and exclusive approaches to peace- and society-building in the region.

Within the Berlin Process the WPS Agenda is not referenced, even though all participating countries have developed National Action Plans. Sharing best practice within the region or developing a common agenda would greatly benefit reconciliatory efforts, both in terms of subject and representation. **The inclusion of WCSOs on the agenda of reconciliation has been extremely limited, and especially in recent years gender is not considered for the broad topic of security.** In addition to considering gender, reconciliation and the overcoming of past grievances also require intersectional perspectives which are entirely absent from the Berlin Process.

INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVES

In 2019, the **Declaration of Western Balkan Partners on Roma Integration within the EU**

enlargement process was adopted during the Poznan Summit and has since been endorsed each year. The declaration itself misses the opportunity to consider gender or other intersectional perspectives. Roma women are faced with additional challenges in the region, including “access to education, sexual and reproductive rights, [...] access to clean water and sanitation, and decent housing”¹⁴. Similarly, the issues of migration and security featured prominently during the peak of the humanitarian, so-called migration crisis in 2015 and 2016, however without any mention of gender, hence also not considering intersectional challenges experienced by women or LGBTQI+ migrants and refugees.

In the programming of RYCO, particular awareness to gender issues is not visible, even though the youth organisation – being already concerned with the marginalised group of “youth” – could be prone to considering intersectional perspectives in a more structured approach.

ECONOMIC COOPERATION

An often-referenced document (Summit Conclusions of 2020, 2021, 2023) on enhancing regional economic cooperation is the EC’s **2020 Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans** (EIP). In the document, there is no reference to gender. Women are mentioned once: “Improving labour market participation, especially of young people and women, disadvantaged groups and minorities, in particular Roma, will be a priority and can strongly contribute to economic growth.”¹⁵ Unlike Roma inclusion which builds upon the 2019 Declaration on Roma integration and (further down) specific measures on youth inclusion, no such specifying reference is made with regards to women. Neither is a gender-specific annex included to the EIP.

¹² Western Balkans Summit London 2018, Joint Declaration on Regional Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations in the Framework of the Berlin Process; Joint Declaration on Missing Persons in the Framework of the Berlin Process; and Joint Declaration on War Crimes in the Framework of the Berlin Process, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b45ad3eed915d39deab9483/180710_WBS_Joint_Declarations.pdf.

¹³ Women’s Rights Centre Montenegro et al, Joint Letter from Women’s rights groups from the Western Balkans. Unpublished letter to EU High Representative Federica Mogherini, Commissioner for Enlargement Johannes Hahn, UK Foreign Office Coordinator of Western Balkans Summit 2018 Andrew Page et al., July 2018.

¹⁴ European Roma Rights Centre, The Struggle Continues! Solidarity and Greeting to my Female Colleagues on International Women’s Day, March 2019, <https://www.errc.org/news/the-struggle-continues-solidarity-and-greetings-to-my-female-colleagues-on-international-womens-day>.

¹⁵ European Commission, Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, 2020, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/30108255-efa8-4274-962a-c24faee32734_en?filename=communication_on_wb_economic_and_investment_plan_october_2020_en.pdf.

In the output of the Berlin Process, women are rarely mentioned as a specific group and if so, they appear in relation their relatively higher unemployment, acknowledging the importance of gender-equal participation in the labour market for economic growth and prosperity. Women's inclusion in the labour market is discussed from the perspective of equal opportunities and with the incentive of economic growth, not that of political or societal change. Despite high unemployment rates, still many women are employed in wage labour (with a significant pay gap), but care and housework remains largely a women's domain with men's contribution to house and care work in the margins. Traditional gender roles are visible and manifested in families, i.e. the private sphere, which creates challenges and stigmas for working mothers and does not incentivise male partners and fathers to equal burden sharing. This perspective is not reflected in the output of the Berlin Process

A preparatory policy brief for the Poznan Summit 2019 notes: **“Lack of part-time initiatives, child-care and elderly care services, and challenging patriarchal mindsets are key issues that need to be tackled” to change women's activity rate.**¹⁶ The attention paid to these issues is commendable, and illustrates the possibility of addressing them within the Berlin Process. The issue of (non-)activity in the labour market relates heavily to issues of social protection and welfare, unpaid care and reproductive work and policy and the distribution of financial resources among men and women (also significantly impacting unbearable situations in a partnership, such as gender-based and domestic violence).

Trying to increase women's share in employment without considering issues of care and reproductive work adds to women's double burden. Without systematic structures to tackle root causes of inequality in the economy, including gender-based discriminatory practices, uneven distribution of care work, and the lack of protective legislation¹⁷, women's economic inclusion and ultimately economic development of the region overall will not be sustainable nor equal.

The **connectivity agenda** is a topic that has enjoyed much, and growing, attention during the Berlin Process and has subsequently been pushed up on the EC's priority list for EU enlargement. Recent experiences in the region have exposed the vulnerability of women and girls to harassment and misogyny online, including the sharing of intimate, increasingly often deepfake, images in messenger chats¹⁸. The digital space has shown to be an incubator for misogynist narratives, hate speech and their dissemination. Anti-gender, populist groups have shown great skill in utilising digital spaces to spread their ideas, paired with strategic disinformation campaigns. Disinformation often couples misogynist and nationalist narratives – particularly visible in campaigning against abortion and reproductive rights – and seriously undermines democratic development in the region.

The EU digital single market is a great leap into the technical age and preparation of the region to join is a priority, but one that needs to ensure the digital inclusion of women and minorities not only in terms of training and providing access, but importantly by providing safeguards for a safe online experience, including legal protection. The issue of connectivity relates both to the preparation of the region for the “technical age”, as well as everyday improvements. As such, policies need to caution that diverse and varied everyday experiences are considered in the development of a connectivity agenda.

The documents prepared for the Berlin Process relate on various occasions to the themes and challenges discussed above – but without any mention to gender or diverse background and experience. Consequently, recommendations are missing a crucial factor enabling lasting and sustainable development.

Similarly recognised as crucial for sustainable transformation and pushed by the EU, is **the Green Agenda**, an overarching strategy relating to various negotiation chapters, featuring prominently in summit conclusions since 2019. The 2020

¹⁶ Civil Society Forum of the Western Balkans, Policy Brief 03/19, Economic Issues in the Western Balkans, 2019, <https://wb-csf.eu/docs/CSF-PB-03-19-full-4.pdf>.

¹⁷ For more insights, see: The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, Women's Rights in the Western Balkans, 2023, <https://kvinna-till-kvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/The-Kvinna-till-Kvinna-Foundation-Womens-Rights-in-Western-Balkans-2023.pdf>.

¹⁸ Milivojevic, A. Undressed by AI: Serbian Women Defenseless against deepfake porn, BIRN, 03 July 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/07/03/undressed-by-ai-serbian-women-defenceless-against-deepfake-porn/>

Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans references the beforementioned EIP, but does not mention gender nor women¹⁹. Despite the EU's own gender commitment, also applicable for EU member states, numerous women-led grassroots organisations for green and just transition and various research indicating the detrimental and disproportionate effect of climate change on women, women are only mentioned indirectly in the document: "The transition to climate-neutrality must be socially just and inclusive in order to be a success. It must be recognised [...] that the most vulnerable are the most exposed to the harmful effects of climate change."²⁰ **Limiting women to a vulnerable group without agency is a flawed representation of reality and renders them invisible in their contribution to shaping, and being affected by, climate transition.**

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRATISATION

A notable exception to the largely gender-blind process has been the London chairpersonship in 2018. During civil society consultations that year, gender issues featured prominently on the agenda and a policy brief on gender issues was produced. In the brief, **gender-based violence, political participation and decision-making, lack of gender mainstreaming, gender stereotyping and discrimination in the labour market are highlighted as key concerns for CSOs from the Western Balkans.** With "national authorities [...] still largely characterised by poor monitoring and evaluation practices" the authors called for a systematic approach to "reporting on specific indicators and gender equality policy documents", not least to take the burden of monitoring from the shoulders of WCSOs²¹. **Six years later, WCSOs demands for systematic approaches and committed structures to gender equality are still not implemented.**

With regards to gender equality within the framework of parliaments and Members of Parliament (MPs), Recommendations from a 2018 Berlin Process parliamentary seminar on the Western Balkans include the establishment for a regional network of women's MPs. Similar networks have been established throughout the region (not through the Berlin Process) to provide skill training to female politicians, as well as a networking opportunity. A notable effort, such structures bear the danger to avoid root causes of women's exclusions from decision-making processes such as social norms, prejudice and institutional barriers like clientelist male networks and informal decision-making structures. In addition to training women to fight allegorical 'patriarchal windmills', gender programmes also need to address men and their gender prejudice.

The decline of democracy is discussed extensively, but without tangible effect. In the region, a feeling of exclusion from decision-making and distrust in political institutions contribute to the populist appeal of conspiracy narratives as well as authoritarian governance²², particularly in times of economic precarity and instability. **Anti-gender groups and their direct links to nationalist and right-wing groups and parties pose a serious threat to democracy in the region.** Their politics of fear and the strong mobilising factor of an anti-gender agenda, combined with conspiracy narratives and populist discourse, actively undermine the efforts communicated throughout the years in Berlin Process and enlargement documents²³. WCSOs are a specific target of such attacks, both for their efforts on topics like democratisation, equality and reconciliation, and because of their members' genders. Anti-gender narratives (which are also popular among political parties) and the danger they pose not only to gender equality and women's rights, but ultimately also to democracy as well as the region's EU perspective overall are notoriously absent from the Berlin Process.

¹⁹ Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, 2020, <https://www.rcc.int/files/user/docs/196c92cf0534f629d-43c460079809b20.pdf>

²⁰ European Commission, Commission Staff working Document - Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, October 2020, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-10/green_agenda_for_the_western_balkans_en.pdf

²¹ Civil Society Forum of the Western Balkan Summit Series, CSF Policy Brief No. 04 Gender Issues in the Western Balkans, April 2018, https://wb-csf.eu/docs/Gender_Issues.pdf.pdf

²² Rechica, Vlora, Jovan Bliznakovski and Misha Popovikj, The Populist Citizen: Why do the citizens support populist leaders and policies in North Macedonia? IDSCS study No 8/2022, August 2022, https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2_B5_PopulizamENG.pdf

²³ EuroMed Rights and The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, The Fierce and the Furious. Feminist Insights into the anti gender narratives and movement, 2019, https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/The_fierce_and_the_furious.pdf



Who

Representation and Participation in the Berlin Process

On a descriptive level, gender equality entails to thrive towards gender equal representation in the Berlin Process, both on the level of ministerial representation and among other participants or contributors to the process (i.e. in the CSF, Business Forum or Youth Forum). However, nominal parity between genders can only be a starting point, as representation is the tip of the iceberg to underlying, structural issues of (in)equality.

HIGH-LEVEL FORMATS

Being initially a **high-level diplomatic initiative**, the attendees of the Berlin Process Ministerial Meetings and Summits are government representatives from the respective countries. Both in the Western Balkans and in EU participating countries, women are underrepresented in governments, particularly as head of government or as foreign ministers. As such, men outnumber women on the nominal scale in these formats.

PARLIAMENTS

The inclusion of parliamentarians (male or female) has not been consistent. Activities in 2018 focused heavily on the “unique role of parliaments in promoting and pursuing the aims of the Berlin Process”²⁴. During the Western Balkan Summit in 2019, the need to include national parliaments in the Process was officially recognised, as a means to strengthen legitimacy of the process and because of parliaments’ indispensable role for democratic development. In parliaments, substantive representation matters. **Across the region, women are still underrepresented in politics, across all elected positions, but most severely at the local level.**

When discussing parliaments’ inclusion into the Berlin Process, discriminatory structures within national politics also need to be considered. **Female politicians are exposed to gender stereotyping and harassment and suffer from party clientelism and marginalisation within political bodies**²⁵. Hate speech has, together with strategic disinformation, been recognised on several occasions throughout the Berlin Process as a serious issue for worsening democratic culture, however without the inclusion of a gender perspective. Women politicians and activists alike – are most frequently exposed, and particularly vulnerable to targeted attacks and violence, aimed at silencing women or feminist ideas. This creates an additionally hostile environment for political participation of women. Inclusion as well as training of MPs, and interparliamentary networks, need to include a gender dimension that is not limited to women’s exchange, but looks at root causes of gender inequality in political participation. **For gender relations to change, men need to be held accountable too, and parliaments are a great place to advance gender equality and democratic culture simultaneously.**

CIVIL SOCIETY

Since 2015, **civil society** has played a central role in the Berlin Process and an annual Civil Society/ Think Tank Forum has been organised alongside the main summit (however not always simultaneously in the same venue), enabling formats for politicians and civil society to meet and mingle in working groups

²⁴ Parliamentary Seminar on the Western Balkans, UK Parliament. Summary Conclusions from the Chair, September 2018, https://d23pzak-m7ws4rd.cloudfront.net/prod/uploads/2018/09/WBS18_Conclusions.pdf

²⁵ The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, Women’s Rights in the Western Balkans, 2023, <https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/The-Kvinna-till-Kvinna-Foundation-Womens-Rights-in-Western-Balkans-2023.pdf>.

and on discussion panels to varying degrees of facilitated interaction. From the beginning, representatives from the civil society have been given time to present shared recommendations to Summit participants. While some representatives from civil society appreciate the opportunity to address civil society concerns directly to political leaders, representatives of WCSOs particularly lament the lack of proper attention given to recommendations shared this way.

Throughout the years some (irregular) formats have been highlighted as **more successful methods to exchange ideas and opinions and to ensure the inclusion of civil society recommendations in Summit output, including shared panels for topic-specific discussion, the inclusion of civil society representatives in ministerial meetings and politicians attending the CSF/TTF.**

The Berlin Process poses different **accessibility issues to WCSOs.** The way how civil society is included and consulted, privileges researchers, think tankers and policy-oriented civil society over activist grassroots organisations. The majority of organisations concerned with gender issues do however belong to the latter group. **The process itself is policy oriented and highly technical, which requires specific expertise from CSOs, one of the reasons that Think Tank research has dominated over grassroots activist civil society over the years.** In fact, knowledge about the existence of the Berlin Process is limited, even among WCSOs who work on EU enlargement more broadly.

In recent years, **gender parity among participants of the CSF/TTF has been aspired by organisers.** Because of the high share of female researchers and employees in CSOs and Think Tanks from the region, parity has often been achieved. Among a majority of participants prevails a limited understanding and knowledge of what a fuller gender perspective would entail. The absence of structured gender guidelines further sidelines actors who speak up about gender equality.

YOUTH

RYCO prides itself with having been sensitive to gender-balanced participation in its various programmes and employment policies, however despite this ambition, formalised structures to assure this are lacking. Being already concerned with a marginalised, yet horizontally important social group, RYCO and RYCO's employees are well-versed in what it means to advocate for the interests and needs of a disadvantaged group. As of recently, a more structured approach to mainstreaming gender is being developed. It will be interesting to follow RYCO's development in this regard and any good practices that follow.



How

Gender perspective in procedural structures of the Berlin Process

Cooperation enables change: this is the simple premise at the foundation of the Berlin Process, particularly aimed at – and initially quite successful – the normalisation of (diplomatic) relations between countries with an unresolved legacy of conflict, war and ethnic cleansing. As such, the structured approach to regular meetings contributed to the larger goal of reconciliation. **The way how the Process itself has been organised over the years and the ways in which civil society perspectives have been included (or not) matters to assess the process’s (possible) avenues for including a gender perspective and thereby the countries’ full demographics.** Democratic and sustainable structures crucially depend on the design of political processes.

In the Berlin Process, no structures for the systemic inclusion of a gender perspective, such as guidelines for gender mainstreaming, exist. Unlike the Declaration for Roma Integration or commitment to youth inclusion (through RYCO), no similar commitment has been signed or mechanism established to ensure the integration

of a gender perspective. Representatives of WCSOs who participated in CSF/TTF working groups share the perception that gender perspectives are not considered relevant beyond a very limited understanding (i.e. questions of nominal representation, token mention of women etc.). Where they have been invited for gender-specific consultations, time frames were short and preparation insufficient²⁶. This relates to a general lack of awareness, but also lack of knowledge, about what it means to include a gender perspective in a process such as the Berlin Process. Governments particularly should have a serious interest in developing cooperative structures and consultative processes with gender experts to enable a thoughtful application of gender mainstreaming, but also to face the knowledge gap on gender equality issues across the board.

In terms of creating a more inclusive process, **CSF/TTF has been a success of the Berlin Process and an element that distinguishes it from other high-level political process, because of the close proximity of (certain representatives of) civil society and high-level politicians in a semi-structured format.** With the pandemic restrictions, the traction of those shared spaces achieved in London (2018) and Poznan (2019) was lost to zoom meetings and more exclusive formats. During Tirana’s chairpersonship (2023), the opportunity of civil society representatives to participate for example in the (sectoral) ministerial meetings of Ministers of Interior proved to be particularly fruitful to see their recommendations feature in the final summit conclusions.

It is important to note that the organisation of each annual cycle of events depends on the host country and local organisations and as such the level of continuity is low and the organisation of different formats, and inclusion of civil society, varies. Different formats of the Process are organised by different organisations/ bodies (including the host government/ MFA, Regional Cooperation Council and local think tanks/CSOs) with different priorities and in the case of governments, different national interests. **However, continuity is given in the**

²⁶ In 2018, women’s rights groups from the region issued an open letter, among others to the European Commission, to criticise the gender shortcomings in the Berlin Process

way of a habit to endorse former successes of the Process in consecutive meetings and summits, showcasing the importance of creating binding structures for reference to build upon (as can be seen in different ways with the early successes in good neighbourly relations, the Roma Integration Declaration and RYCO).

Enabling constructive meetings at eye-level is crucial for a democratic, future-oriented Process – especially at times of shrinking spaces for civil society. Furthermore, networks of think tank and civil society established through the CSF/TTF need to be further strengthened while also enabling local or grassroots organisations and activists to contribute more. **Using the CSF/TTF as an incubator for (potentially visionary) ideas in addition to the technical policy approach might be a way to include diverse actors and to open up space for gender and intersectional perspectives, as well as non-traditional or “soft” tools for cooperation.**

Substantive inclusion of civil society requires agency of local organisations. CSOs and other actors in the region possess great expertise, context-relevant experience and attachment to the region. In the Berlin Process, CSOs have limited opportunities to contribute to agenda and priority setting, consultations often happen with a short time frame or untransparent mechanisms to choose participants. Enabling regional agency for governments and civil society, including WCSOs, in the Berlin Process is an important factor contributing to more legitimacy.

Besides a free and diverse civil society, parliaments and parliamentarians are equally important for strong democracies. Interparliamentary cooperation was among the issues discussed extensively during London’s host of the Berlin Process in 2018, but the issue has only slowly shifted into focus.

The Berlin Process, especially compared to other EU integration processes, is comparably little known among the citizens of the Western Balkans, including CSOs and WCSOs concerned with European advocacy or funded through EU funds. A lack of tangible outputs, the non-formalised

structure and a failure to communicate the goals and successes of the process all contribute to the lack of knowledge about the Process. Even if not advertising the Process itself, communicating its goals is advisable.

The Process also suffers from a lack of political legitimacy: MPs are not included in decision-making processes of the Berlin Process, or only in weak consultative functions. Ensuring greater involvement of parliaments in the process can increase legitimacy of the Berlin Process, contribute to democratisation and can strengthen parliaments overall. Focusing on a cross-cutting gender perspective in interparliamentary cooperation and training is an important step to change attitudes among MPs – particularly among men.

In parliaments and elsewhere, it is crucial for gender to be brought to discussions, working groups, panels etc. as a horizontal and cross-cutting issue. The instances (e.g. London 2018 and Berlin 2024) **where gender equality has been considered in the agenda always singled out “gender issues”.** **In addition to the important focus, gender should be a point of interest across working groups.** Structured guidelines and a systematic approach to mainstreaming gender would be an inevitable tool for such a process.

Ten years of the Berlin Process invite for critical reflection on its positive achievements, as well as visionary outlooks. The renewed momentum of the Process at times of enlargement support, provides opportunity to re-assess priorities and re-designing innovation fit for the changed social and political environment of the year 2024 and going forward. Gender innovation should be one of the next steps across the three domains of content, representation and procedural structure in the Berlin Process.

METHODOLOGY

The primary methodology for conducting this gender assessment of the Berlin Process has been content analysis of Summit declarations and conclusions, preparatory policy briefs and CSF forum recommendations, based on the criteria listed below and drawing on the definition of key themes highlighted in the beginning of the report. Think Tank analyses have also been considered. In addition, the assessment has featured a specific focus on the dimension of youth, as a success story of the Berlin Process thanks to the establishment of RYCO. The findings of discourse and content analysis have been complemented by interviews with relevant participants in the Berlin Process in order to provide additional input on gender perspectives throughout the Process and attain insights on behind-the-scenes processes.

In total 11 interviews were conducted with Kvinna till Kvinna partner organisations in the Western Balkans, gender experts from the region as well as people involved in the preparation and organisation of Berlin Process related events across different participating countries, particularly the Civil Society/ Think Tank Forum in recent years. Given the focus on content analysis as primary methodology, extensive interviews were not prioritized but rather included as a complement. While it would have been relevant and interesting to also interview government representatives from the Western Balkans as well as participating EU member states, this has not been possible within the scope and time frame of the assignment and remains an avenue to explore in future analyses of the Berlin Process. The perspectives of government actors are however still central to the assessment, through the analysis of summit declarations, conclusions and preparatory policy briefs.

Criteria used for the assessment

1. The prevalence of a gender perspective in the outputs of the Berlin Process and related forums.
2. Attention paid to gender equality (legislation, mechanisms and implementation) including potential barriers to achieving it (social norms, legislative, institutional barriers etc.) and to the rights of LGBTQI+ persons in the Berlin Process' outputs and related forums.
3. Participation of women (including politicians, experts and civil society) in the Berlin Process and connected forums, and accounts of women's political participation.
4. Inclusion of intersectional perspectives through references to Roma women, women of national minorities, refugees and internally displaced persons, women with different abilities, and LGBTQI+.
5. Inclusion, participation and role of civil society, especially women's organisations, and women researchers in Think Tanks, including nominal participation and assessment of impact reached.
6. Recognition of and reference to women's roles in peacebuilding, reconciliation and security infrastructure.

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