



MAKING CONNECTIVITY THE HARD WIRE OF THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL COMMUNITY

Lessons learned from the Berlin Process

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EPC OBSERVATORY ANALYSIS

October 2023

Aimed at fostering political dialogue and cooperation across the continent, the European Political Community (EPC) aspires to bring together political will with tangible results in the areas of security, stability and prosperity. The idea of having geopolitical and geo-economic discussions at leaders' level has been welcomed by all parties involved.

The continental-wide format remains a formidable platform for top representatives of non-EU countries to get unfiltered facetime with each other and, indeed, with EU states to discuss matters of security and connectivity. This is all the more essential when considering that the further from the 'EU core' (i.e. from "Brussels") a country is, the bigger the competitive forces from 3rd country models of cooperation and development become.

But meanwhile the European Union, whose 27 member states are tied into a much tighter political and regulatory framework, is engaged in a much-awaited debate on its reform all by facing a context of heightened geopolitical competition. This may sap much energy needed to be injected in EPC.

In light of the aforementioned factors and the overbearing issues of war and peace on the continent, there is a risk for the EPC of getting stuck in a high-level but inconclusive political discussions on the most pressing issues of the day, and falling short in transitioning into the policymaking and implementation stages. On a smaller scale, the Berlin Process (BP) experienced similar challenges during its initial years.

As the BP in its beginning, the EPC adheres to the "Three No's" principle: no new budget, no new institutions, no new legislation". Also like the BP in its early stage, the loose format of the EPC has sparked a lively discussion about its scope and primary focus.

To face those challenges, we posit that the Berlin Process can provide a good example to rescue the EPC from impending irrelevance. In practical terms, as in the case of BP multi-layered connectivity can become the hard wire of the EPC. Supported by political will it contributes to security, to migration management and supports the creation of the right environment for a value-based environment that stimulates growth and development. To this end, infrastructure-based connectivity should be complemented with p2p, b2b, i2i connectivity. Its aim would be to create a Europe-wide area of regulations, norms and standards in both the technical and technological spheres as well as in good governance.

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To increase its legitimacy and cement its attachment to democratic values, successfully tested Berlin Process novelties such as early engagement of citizens, of youth and of civil society could be introduced in the EPC design, embedded in the implementation phase and become organic part of its monitoring.

THE ADDED VALUE OF MULTI-LAYERED CONNECTIVITY

The EPC can be built upon the experience of the South-east Europe 6 Connectivity Agenda (SEE6 CA). SEE6 CA - now morphed into the EU Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans. The SEE6 CA aims at supporting the development of transport and energy infrastructure in key road and rail routes, inland waterways and ports, electricity and gas transmission including the production of renewable energy. Between 2015 and 2020 it supported the region with EUR 1 billion in grants 37 transport and 8 energy infrastructure projects, of which EUR 124 million was spent on technical assistance and project preparation.

Built upon the synergy between hardware (EU-linked infrastructure), “software” (EU norms, standards and regulations) and policy-making (based on EU *acquis*), the SEE6 CA is much more than the sum of infrastructure projects, of market measures or standards separately. It creates multilayered links amongst EU and SEE6 countries and regions. It directly contributes to growth and development in a secure environment whose institutions (local, regional and area-like institutions involved) subscribe to the same democratic values and principles of good governance.

What the Berlin Process brought to the connectivity agenda is coordinated political will exercised in all the phases of policy-making and of project implementation in the Balkans region. Since 2014, the EU and SEE6 have developed a valuable experience and expertise on working towards the same goals on transport, energy and digital networks (since 2019 Eastern Partnership countries are a part of TEN-T too).

Integration of Balkan countries into EU energy and transport networks has resulted in those non-Member states adopting the EU *acquis* in technical norms, standards and practices of good governance. Moreover, the socialization impact allows for SEE6 national administrations to be better prepared for when becoming a MS.

By focusing on tangible and measurable outcomes, willing EU Member States with strong ties with the SEE6 region, SEE6 countries and the EU Commission, have gathered substantial knowhow, built up best practices, and drafted lessons learnt on how to develop multi country connectivity projects, all by adhering to EU value-based system.

The importance of political will in infrastructure prioritization can be illustrated by the re-inclusion of the segment Skopje – Durres of Corridor 8 (C8) in the TEN-T map of core projects. Being the only horizontal corridor of the revised EU TEN-T network, which connects the Adriatic Sea with the Black Sea and going through Albania, North Macedonia

and Bulgaria, Corridor 8 traverses only NATO member countries. In the context of the war in Ukraine, it constitutes a “Bosporus Strait on Rails” and has a hugely strategic importance for the protection of Europe’s southern flank. Beyond the EU legislative, technical and financial preconditions for such an inclusion, BP provided visibility, support, inclusiveness and political will at the service of all C8 supporters and stakeholders. In the case of EPC, Black Sea undersea internet cable can be an example to be explored.

Lastly, the BP is the only intergovernmental initiative lead by EU MS in which non-MS (SEE6 countries) enter into multilateral dialogue with the EU Commission (the accession process is based on a bilateral ‘dialogue’). This allows interested, involved and engaged EU Member States to create a coalition of the willing in order to progress further in their relations with non-MS. It is our observation that it is because of these “flag-bearing” Member States that the process gets the much-needed political push and the support it requires.

THE WAY FORWARD

The missing EPC budget constraint can be addressed by focussing existing EU connectivity-tied budget lines into building up best cases. This will create a “market” where International Financial Institutions can compete to finance the best projects, leveraging the EU grant component through loans. Most of project preparation and technical design in the SEE6 is prepared with IPA funding through EU grants. SEE6 countries apply to receive further funding through a mix of grants and loans in a regional competition through an EU-blending platform called Western Balkans Investment Framework – WBIF. The EPC can use a similar system (or explore the possibility of extending the current one to cover all EPC).

The absence of EPC institutions can be dealt with – at least initially – by the existing regional cooperation structures that cover the SEE6 such as Transport Community¹ and Energy Community². These structures have proven capable in aligning sectoral policy-making in third countries with that of EU, and laying the ground for project-design and implementation based on (and harmonized with) EU *acquis*. This will also plug the gap of any missing legislative power of the EPC.

¹ The Transport Community has 36 participants – the European Union member states represented by the European Commission, the six South East European Parties (the Republic of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, and the Republic of Serbia) and the three observing participants (Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine).

² The Energy Community has nine Contracting Parties - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, North Macedonia, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia and Ukraine. The European Union is a Party to the Energy Community Treaty. Any European Union Member State may obtain the status of a Participant. Armenia, Norway and Türkiye take part as Observers.

SEIZE THE MOMENTUM

The ongoing budgetary planning for the European Union's multiannual financial framework for 2028-2035 should be leveraged to identify and endorse pilot connectivity initiatives within the EPC with a focus on the TEN-T and Projects of Common Interest in energy, in digital, etc. Ukraine and Moldova have already signed EU agreements associating them to the Connecting Europe Facility³ across the union in transport, energy, digital and telecommunication projects) for 2021–2027 under the EU Multiannual Financial Framework.

This enables promoters to apply for EU funding for projects of common interest in the transport, energy and digital realms, further improving those countries' connectivity with their EU neighbours. Access to EU financial support comes with the obligation to apply EU technical standards and good governance practice through project implementation cycle. This will allow for best cases of infrastructure project implementation to be identified, built upon and promoted in the EPC area through connectivity projects.

The importance of political will should be underlined. It is only when Chancellor Scholz appointed a special German Envoy to the Western Balkans and offered him visible support that the Berlin Process was reinvigorated. Following this example, we suggest that France, as the initiator of the EPC, should empower a plenipotentiary ambassador for the EPC.

Moreover, the increasing sensibility to connectivity and the respective political and financial support to worldwide connectivity initiatives (the India-Middle East–Europe corridor being the latest one) where European countries participate, should be accounted for with the goal of identifying potential synergies, face competitions, and initiate exchanges wherever beneficial for the EPC.

The EPC should be given the space to adapt and grow through meaningful cooperation and competition, all by mainstreaming European core values. The EPC has the potential to evolve into a flexible political platform where collective challenges, especially those pertaining to security and stability, can be effectively addressed. A multilayered connectivity foundation underpins these endeavours.

And most importantly, learning from the SEE6 experience the citizens of EPC countries should be on board from the beginning to increase the democratic legitimacy of the entire process.

³ The Connecting Europe Facility is a European Union fund established in 2014 for infrastructure investments, in particular in the Trans-European Networks.