



Policy Brief: The Working Group on the Western Balkans

Although the EU and the US agree that the long-term goal for the Western Balkans is European integration, progress has stalled. This series of working group meetings aims at launching a discussion on the hurdles to enlargement in the Western Balkans, the tools available to various international actors in the region, and how these resources might best be applied to reach the goal of integration most efficiently. These meetings, therefore, address issues that are at the core of the making the Transatlantic relationship work.

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Policy Brief from Meeting VI: Setting an Agenda for Transatlantic Cooperation

According to U.S. and EU officials, transatlantic coordination, communication and cooperation is excellent, and has improved substantially over the last few years. Meetings between the EU, U.S. State Department and OSCE officials occur regularly and conversations happen on a daily basis. The most important elements of the policy toward the Western Balkans are EU led and U.S. supported. This cooperation was most apparent in the Serbia-Kosovo negotiations that were restarted this year. The U.S. has joined the EU on policies dealing with specific issues, such as women's empowerment, economic development and housing for refugees and internally displaced people. The overall policy of Euroatlantic integration is openly supported not only in Washington and Brussels, but also by civil society: opinion polls consistently reveal that EU accession is what the people of the region want.

Relatively small differences—such as whether or not to close the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia—can be brushed aside as red herrings next to the larger problems that originate in the region itself. Calls for a more robust policy have been interpreted by some as a reflex leftover from the intervention of the 1990s: some observers, they argue, have yet to grow accustomed to viewing the region as stable, rather than fragile. Despite the improved coordination, however, there are certain realities that cause concern that the current level of EU-U.S. collaboration is insufficient to the difficult task of integrating the Western Balkans.

It is not insignificant, for example, that much is made of the small points of contention between the EU and U.S. by the leaders in the region. Any dissenting voice emanating from the EU or its member states, European political parties or think tanks in the U.S. is taken as evidence that the transatlantic relationship is faltering and that the EU

integration policy will be suspended or abandoned. This clearly impedes reform in the region, and builds support for the old Balkan *modi operandi*.

Another problem with the EU-U.S. cooperation on the Balkans is that it is less robust compared to transatlantic cooperation on other issues. Moreover, other U.S. policy strategies, such as the recently launched strategy in Asia, are much more visible than anything they are doing in Europe. Despite troubling signs, such as violence in Kosovo, the inability of Bosnian leaders to form a government and limited evidence of a reform trajectory in Albania or Macedonia, there has been no proportionate policy strengthening. Even in countries that do not seem as fragile as they once had, today, it is their stability that is the problem. Stability in the Balkans seems to be based on an unnerving commitment to the status quo, where leaders have no interest in adopting reforms. The constancy of the EU-U.S. strategy in the face of disturbing developments can be interpreted as deafness or a lack of energy to act, and seems to offer evidence of enlargement fatigue.

Discussion between EU and U.S. experts on the region reveal real differences in policy preferences, the methods of policy implementation and perceptions of success, which may offer keys for how the transatlantic relationship might be further improved and adapted to the changing policy context. These differences include:

- 1) U.S. goals and standards tend to be more idealistic than the EU's which aim at making incremental advances along a discrete set of practical policy goals.
- 2) The EU values and is comfortable with ambiguity, whereas their U.S. counterparts prefer outcomes that clearly favor the 'good' versus the 'bad' and policy statements that clearly draw red lines, that would incur punitive measures to local actors who cross them from the international community.
- 3) EU policy does not depend on a particular political leader's or party's cooperation, whereas U.S. foreign policy is often focused on personal affinities with particular leaders or political party.
- 4) U.S. foreign policy analysts tend to focus on meeting predetermined goals, such as EU and NATO accession, as the measure of policy success, whereas EU analysts focus on ensuring that the correct process is preserved regardless of whether that process seems to impede progress toward the goal.
- 5) U.S. foreign policy experts and officials are more comfortable and institutionally able to engage directly with the public, and build emotional trust with people in the region. By contrast, EU officials tend to engage almost exclusively with the policy elite in closed-door meetings. In public speeches, their focus is on technocratic issues that do not resonate with the public in the Western Balkans.

Often, these differences are magnified when viewed from the Western Balkans, where they can be exploited by leaders as they play one side against the other and behave in ways that undermine the joint policy.

The differences in diplomatic style may offer insights into how to better divide the labor between the EU and U.S. and forge a united policy agenda for the region. By capitalizing

on different strengths, the EU and U.S. can sharpen their reactions to crises as they arise, and conserve energy that would be better devoted to more pressing priorities. It is important to consider that new ideas may percolate in the region about how to change the political game when the international focus is elsewhere. But in order to benefit from these ideas, the EU and U.S. should make small changes to their policy so that they are receptive to them.

A new joint agenda should acknowledge upcoming events—such as elections, the NATO summit and Croatia’s accession date—and use these as opportunities to apply pressure or shift the focus of reforms in the region. For example, it is not clear that local populations or U.S. officials understand the implications of Croatia’s EU accession for the Bosnian agricultural sector. The prospect that trade would end if Bosnia cannot regulate agricultural products at the state level should be used as a hook for institutional, or even constitutional, reform.

As has been raised in previous Working Group policy briefs, the ability for the EU and U.S. to tie joint initiatives to EU accession goals along the lines of the visa liberalization policy, would offer populations the opportunity to better understand the components of the *acquis communautaire* and offer them a role and guidelines on how to make clear demands on their elected leaders. It is important to remember the central role played by the local civil society in promoting the successful visa liberalization policy: by petitioning their governments to adopt related reforms, civil society proved that it is the EU’s greatest asset in the enlargement policy.

In addition to the above-mentioned joint initiatives on refugee housing and women’s empowerment (each of which have complimentary *acquis*), other shared interests between the EU and U.S. could be developed into sector-specific reform policies. This could unlock intractable problems such as corruption, education, ineffective state institutions and even bilateral issues.

Raising the profile of EU-U.S. cooperation will also limit the influence of other actors in the region, such as Russia, Turkey and China, which may not be pursuing goals that ally comfortably with EU accession goals.

A joint agenda should also address the EU’s messaging problem. Often, policy pronouncements that make sense to EU insiders do not resonate in the region and may even be manipulated to feed cynicism. It is important to acknowledge that ethnic identities and interpretations of history will not go away, especially when cultural attributes are institutionally entrenched. By changing the tone of the message and addressing the wishes of the people of the region directly, the EU and the U.S. could begin to offer them alternative narratives for the future that match what the poll results reveal are important to them: EU accession. The EU could take a cue from the World Bank, which takes the time to ensure that their policy initiatives support the country’s aspirations, not just those of the international community.

The transatlantic agenda should make it clear that the EU accession policy is not a replacement for democratic consolidation, but relies on democracy in order to succeed. The international community must be careful to include civil society in the elaboration of its policy goals. The EU is already a major player in civil society strengthening and is the main donor for these activities. Yet, recent analysis of civil society development in the region offers insights on what has been achieved as well as what remains to be done in terms of fostering a robust civil society in the region. Over the last decade, the EU has supported NGOs and civil society organizations as a tool for facilitating policy goals. The work of these organizations was driven by external demand, rather than by the needs of local community. EU has remained in the driving seat in terms of determining what the society needed and setting the agenda for social action. Moreover, EU evaluation of the work done by civil society organizations focusses on the capacity of an organization to manage grant funds and attract matching funds for their projects, rather than on the content of their projects.

Civil society analysts have raised concerns that this method of civil society development misses opportunities to connect deeply with the society at multiple levels. Frustration with the international community has often been transferred to local NGOs who are sponsored by it, and do not seem to be doing work that resonates with the public. This clearly limits the ability of civil society actors to build legitimacy and credibility among the people they are supposed to serve.

In order to shift this dynamic, the EU and U.S. should work together to support civil society organizations that are driven by local demands, rather than solely by external policy goals. In their evaluation of sponsored projects, the EU ought to put as much emphasis on what the project has achieved in the society, rather than just looking at how well or poorly the funding has been managed. Finally, civil society has only recently begun to serve in a ‘watchdog’ capacity, in which they evaluate government performance and confront elected leaders. New “truth-o-meter” websites are examples of these initiatives, which are gaining credibility in the region and serve as an important source for information on political parties, state institutions and elected officials. The EU and U.S. ought to continue their support for these and other innovative, local demand-driven civil society initiatives.

The challenges facing the Western Balkans will be much more difficult for the EU to manage than previous enlargements. In the face of these difficulties, it is important to remember that, so far, the trajectory has been slow, but positive. After several rounds of policy failures, the international community seems to have learned that there are no quick fixes. Instead, the EU and its partners ought to focus on the EU’s founding principles as it formulates policies and promotes them in the region.

Ultimately, the call for a new joint agenda between the EU and the U.S. should not be a dramatic departure from the current policy, but it should focus on better tailoring the enlargement policy to the region through the addition of creative policy footnotes. It should focus on raising the profile of the EU in the region so that people can better understand what the accession process entails and how they can contribute to the policy

through their political participation. By intertwining EU and U.S. policy initiatives in the region, the population and elected leaders will realize that the U.S. is standing behind the EU's policy goals, and is not offering an alternative path.