

Summary Report

Inter-diaspora roundtable

Looking up: discussion on the Balkan region

Berlin, Germany, 25 February 2020



Introduction

Diaspora has historically played a significant role in the developments in their countries, and in inter-community and inter-state dynamics, be that through political influence and lobbying or through intellectual and economic capacity, including through remittances. However, diaspora communities of different ethnic backgrounds have predominantly developed rivalries than contacts and cooperation. Reasons for this are numerous. A key reason is that large diaspora communities from the Balkans region left their countries due to wars/conflicts. This has largely shaped their attitudes and perceptions towards each other. Inter-diaspora contacts are primarily established on individual and professional basis rather than on institutional, for example between different associations (business, cultural, political, lobby groups, etc.). The role and potential (intellectual, political, economic) of diaspora is enormous therefore countries of the region have developed specific policies and laws to utilize their potential. Yet, there is no regional strategy that aims at minimum to establish inter-diaspora connection and dialogue.

The Balkan Forum (The BF) is committed to continue working with diaspora communities from the Balkan region, living outside their home countries, and explore opportunities for inter-diaspora dialogue and cooperation with the aim of contributing to the advancement of democratic and socio-economic development of the region.

Roundtable discussion with diaspora from the Balkan region

On 25 February 2020, diaspora community members from the Balkans region met in Berlin, Germany. The inter-diaspora roundtable, organized by The BF with financial support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF), brought together academics, professors, civil society leaders, doctors, engineers, and journalists from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia who reside in European Union countries, the United States, and beyond. The purpose of the roundtable was three-fold:

- 1) establish inter-diaspora contact,
- 2) agree a structured, constructive, and ongoing inter-diaspora dialogue on issues of common interest, and,
- 3) agree a set of joint actions that aim to contribute to advancing democratic and socio-economic development of the region.

Key discussion points

Participants engaged in a positive and constructive discussion, jointly exploring ways to strengthen dialogue, connection, and cooperation among Balkan diaspora communities as drivers of democratic and socio-economic development in the region. They shared their personal experiences and observations in their diaspora community and aimed at comparing and contrasting the way that diaspora is perceived in their countries of origin and abroad. Key issues identified include estrangement and disconnect between the diaspora and their country of origin; rivalries and lack of cooperation between the diaspora of different backgrounds; a less than favourable image of diaspora

abroad; and serious challenges for members of diaspora communities to accommodate/integrate and maintain aspects of their national identity, and/or to professionally develop and build their careers in countries of their residence.

This highlighted the significance of the roundtable to jointly discuss these very pressing matters. The participants stressed the importance of creating new channels and opportunities for cooperation between diaspora communities in order to overcome rivalries and divisions.

Discussions also revealed an evident uncertainty related to questions of identity, origin and belonging when exploring their own role in the diaspora. Seemingly simple questions like “Where are you from?” can prove to be difficult to answer, which for some generations has to do with the collapse of Yugoslavia in the 90’s and shifts in culture and geographical maps. There were opinions that usually, highly educated people do not necessarily identify with diasporas, do not communicate with each other, and do not participate in traditional diaspora structures or events. Also, that there are people who migrated a long time ago, do not intend to move back to the region, but could contribute. It has been agreed that diaspora is a microcosm of the region and that we need to connect with people, including with those who do not actively engage, but care about the situation back at home. This requires mapping the diaspora communities, including different age groups and interests.

It has been discussed that perception of diaspora within the countries of origin can be infused with notions of rivalry and even threat, suffering from a perception of nationals living abroad as foreign, which can result in an atmosphere of mutual rejection and oftentimes making cooperation difficult. There is a perception in the countries of origin that the diaspora is coming back and taking our jobs, especially in public administration. Even though there are ongoing efforts to bring back to the region the knowledge gained abroad and turn the brain drain into brain gain, these have not been very successful primarily due to the challenges to work with public institutions. The participants voiced their concerns that this is evident including during a time when the region is suffering from the brain drain (particularly youth emigration and exodus of medical staff), as statistics indicate that a large number of people are leaving their home countries in search for a better life. However, there have been cases when government institutions in the region (for example Albania) are seeking to recruit people who return to their home country after graduating from the universities abroad.

Also, diaspora carries a notion of finance, frequently being associated solely with monetary benefits. There was a shared sense of feeling among the participants that governments exploit diaspora communities for their political gains and influence, and for advancing their political and/or nationalist agendas. Less so utilizing the potential of diaspora as a bridge between countries of origin and of residence, and to bring knowledge and expertise to the region.

Another difficulty stems from the distribution of potential throughout the world that is not accessible to the region due to said disconnect and alienation. The participants agreed that members of diaspora communities together hold valuable potential, knowledge and skills, which is currently untapped due to a lack of communication and limited opportunities for cooperation. Often, people who have studied and worked abroad are perceived as a threat for people in their countries of their origin. Re-entry into the labour market in the region (countries of origin) has proven to be difficult, influenced by stigma and a heavily implied perspective on the diaspora community that creates high barriers for return. This perception further disconnects the communities. However, there is high potential to create new

opportunities. There is the possibility for the diaspora communities to create a bridge between their country of residence and their country of origin, and connect a cultural chasm that is currently in place.

Collective action is needed to effectively support the next generation of leaders based on the shared values and aspirations. It is important that professionals share their experiences and are enabled to coherently transfer their knowledge and expertise. Creating channels that enable this knowledge transfer and support for young professionals are important areas the participants want to engage in jointly in the future.

The participants were positive and committed to establish connections and tackle the main concerns and issues identified during the discussion. A key element which was agreed upon was identifying more actors, leaders and agents of change among the diaspora communities who are able and motivated to contribute. It is fundamental to give a voice to members of the diaspora and create new opportunities for participation and collaboration. By building a network based on common values and interests, not on shared location, we can provide a platform for cooperation.

One of the pressing issues which was pinpointed was heavily filtered information from the region, often communicated by foreign experts and analysts who are not from the region and/or have limited knowledge and expertise on the Balkans history and politics.

It was agreed that we can work together to improve the spread of information from the region to decision makers in the EU and other institutions. By identifying own experts, and potentially implementing a mentorship program, as a notion of intellectual wealth transfer, it would be possible to build capacity and give people a voice that are seldom heard in high level fora. A joint initiative has been considered as imperative to help put the region on the map and gain better access in high level political discourse, which in addition to knowledge and expertise requires contacts with EU and US institutions. It has been suggested that we can learn from the experience of other diaspora communities, i.e. the Global Diaspora Strategies Toolkit (Reel in the key influencers), and the Washington Office for Latin America (WOLA), to engage with US and EU institutions on foreign policy issues related to the Balkan region.

Creating a shared platform for diaspora and possibilities to channel intellectual remittances back to the region; lowering barriers for return; supporting the next generation of leaders in their paths, and creating more welcoming diaspora communities were suggested as objectives to work on. It was suggested that this could be achieved through organising thematic sub-groups to translate ideas into action on specific areas, and help shape discourse, if not policies.

This first inter-diaspora roundtable which brought together actors from various backgrounds including academia, science, journalism and civil society, offered space for fruitful and constructive discussions to identify areas for collective action in the future, to create momentum, and to tackle divergences and lack of cooperation between the diaspora communities. Central to the discussion was the recognition that even though people have personal stories and experiences, and potentially different cultural backgrounds that define them, the group was able to find common ground, solidarity and unity which remains crucial basis for better understanding and cooperation between the diaspora communities.

Conclusions

Participants committed to launching a process that reduces barriers to collective action; nurturing a multidimensional network, co-created across generations and sectors; holding itself accountable to people in the region; and continuously broadening the network to ensure inclusion and fresh thinking and imagination. A range of actionable ideas proposed by the participants include creating working groups comprised of young generations studying outside the Balkans to engage policymakers, academics, and other stakeholders in order to empower the next generation of leadership and turning brain drain into brain gain by creating channels for the transfer of intellectual remittances back to the region among others. Particularly:

- Focusing on areas that connect us, not divide us. Assess our own potential and identify areas for possible cooperation to foster understanding and communication between diaspora communities.
- Creating pathways to bring knowledge, expertise and people back to the region. By improving cooperation within and between diaspora communities, we can improve mutual understanding and lower barriers for re-entry.
- Providing mentorship to transfer knowledge. Young people especially, experience disconnect to their countries of origin and face identity issues. They are also influenced by the current organised diaspora and governments that want to employ them for specific, often political or religious causes.
- Countering the alienation of people who return to their home countries after working and studying abroad.
- Implementing a comprehensive approach to conceptualise the diaspora also requires that we are open and flexible. A loosely connected network of people and a multidimensional approach based on realistic notions of commitment may produce expected outcomes.

Next Steps/ Follow-up

- Identify leaders and influencers among the diaspora communities, and create a list of people to include in our future activities.
- Organize follow-up events e.g. in Brussels with policy makers.
- Organize future meetings and thematic sub-groups to work on operationalising ideas in specific key areas.
- Create working groups comprised of young generations studying outside the Balkans to engage policymakers, academics and other stakeholders.
- Create a platform (including social/media), The BF one of them, to facilitate experience exchange and collaboration; promote common values, aspirations and interests; highlight the intellectual capital of diaspora; add a positive spin to stories; build a positive narrative, and shape discourse on these and related issues.
- Continue discussion to explore possibilities for academic collaboration, joint research, developing funding applications, and media work (publishing articles) on diaspora.

Annex 1: Agenda

09.00 - 09.30 Registration of participants

09.30 - 10.00 Introduction

The Balkan Forum Executive Director

Participants introduce

10.00 - 11.00 Session 1: Our experience of diaspora

In this session, participants engage in a discussion of their personal experience of their diaspora community, both as members and observers. Identifying practices that either bring people together or create divisions and the impact such practices have on how we coexist.

11.00 - 11.15 Coffee break

11.15 - 12.30 Session 2: Common ground

In this session we'll continue delving into our lived experience to explore common ground between the different diaspora communities and explore ways to strengthen inter-diaspora dialogue as a catalyst for the advancement of democratic and socio-economic development of the region.

12.30 - 13.30 Lunch

13.30 - 15.00 Session 3: Open discussion - moving forward

This last session aims to offer the space to discuss and propose realisable actions leading to strengthening connection between diaspora communities. These could take the form of further round tables, thematic meetings, knowledge exchange visits, institutional collaboration, joint programmes, cultural and artistic events, and more.

15.00 - 15.15 Coffee break

15.15 - 15.30 Key conclusions

Annex 2: List of Participants

1. Anto Janković, President, Center for Economic Prosperity and Freedom (CEPS), member of International Research Network, researcher and Management Committee member of European Cooperation in Science and Technology. Podgorica, Montenegro.
2. Ariadne Papagapitos, co-founder and director of new markets for Localized. New York, USA.
3. Astrit Istrefi, executive director, The Balkan Forum.
4. Avni Dervishi, Master in Political Science-European Affairs, Founder of the Academy for European & Global Strategy. Stockholm, Sweden.
5. Dr. Majda Ruge, Researcher and Foreign Policy - International relations expert. Berlin, Germany.
6. Dr. Alexandra Perović, Associate Professor, University College London, Division of Psychology and Language Sciences. London, UK.
7. Gazmend Berlajolli, program manager, The Balkan Forum.
8. Geriolda Topi, medical doctor and researcher at the Department of Translational Medicine, Lund University. Lund, Sweden.
9. Krenar Gashi, political scientist from Kosovo, currently Programme Manager at the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) in Brussels, Belgium.
10. Leila Bičakčić, founder and CEO of the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIN). Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina.
11. Marina Queins, consultancy work in the fields of environment and energy technology, former Intern at The Balkan Forum.
12. Mia Vukojević, program director for the Western Balkans Program at the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF). New York, USA.
13. Natasha Kocsis, Director, Serbian City Club, London, UK.
14. Panagiotis Tzannetakis, a founding member of the Khora Community Centre in Athens, Greece, and an associate of Symbiosis, Civic School of Political Studies. Berlin, Germany.
15. Samir Beharić, an award-winning youth activist, a TEDx speaker and recent graduate from the University of Vienna and Leipzig University.
16. Sandro Knezović, Senior Research Associate at the Department for International Economic and Political Relations of the Institute for Development and International Relations in Zagreb, Croatia.
17. Sonja Risteska, Project Manager for Southeast Europe in Agora Energiewende. Berlin, Germany.
18. Vjollca Hajdari, journalist, political scientist, ethnologist. Academic/Lecturer at the Center for Eastern Europe. Berlin, Germany.
19. Zvezdana Kovač, Secretary General, European Movement in Serbia. Belgrade, Serbia.

Annex 3: About The Balkan Forum

The Balkan Forum is a regional, multisector platform designed to advance sustainable cross-border dialogue and create a shared regional vision and agenda for cooperative action in the Balkan region based on economic development, democratic values, and the rule of law. We highlight good practices of regional cooperation to policy discussions and promote existing efforts to connect grassroots initiatives, knowledge, and successes to the decision-making levels that are responsible for policymaking and regional and/or EU integration. We adopt a positive approach as the guiding principle for our activities; rather than re-emphasizing the problems that have divided the Balkan populations for many years now, we focus heavily on the positive elements that unite them, including celebrating the diversity and highlighting shared aspirations and values of our societies.

Geographic focus: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia.

Thematic Pillars: Education, Energy, Tourism, Labor Market/Human Capital.

Partnership/collaboration

We partner/interact on regular basis with civil society actors in the Balkan region including youth, media and journalists, experts, academia, public officials, donors, international organizations, business actors, and diaspora.

- Civil society: In July 2018, we lead the establishment of the [Civil Society Platform for Democracy and Human Rights](#) (CSP), a diverse, regional network of currently 35 civil society actors from Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, committed towards assuming greater responsibility for holding our governments accountable for implementing recommendations from the Berlin Process Summits and meeting EU integration criteria. Since its establishment, CSP presented a Common Position at the London Summit in 2018, and a Manifesto for the Poznań Summit in 2019. CSP is conducting research/analysis, and aims to establish a baseline that helps the platform and other actors to monitor the progress made by the WB countries as part of the Berlin Process (particularly since WB summits held London in 2018 and Poznań in 2019), and in meeting EU integration criteria.
- Media. In cooperation with a select number of reputable journalists/media professionals and editors in the countries of our geographic focus, we are working to advance regional cooperation of media in the Balkans region, through internships and mentoring for young journalists, and through conferences and co-production of content. Our activities highlight the advantages of economic cooperation between the countries in the Balkans, and also focus on media freedom, objective and professional reporting, investigative journalism, disinformation, hate speech and nationalist rhetoric.
- Diaspora. We started exploring the possibilities on how can diaspora constructively engage in inter-diaspora dialogue and cooperation, and contribute to the advancement of democratic and socio-economic development of the region.
- Youth. In addition to working with young people, and providing them with internship and capacity building, in 2019 we have established Youth/Education Cooperation Fund to work with and specifically support informal youth groups.