

**UK Parliament House of Commons Foreign Affairs
Committee:
“Western Balkans Summit Inquiry”**

Written Submission

**by Kurt W. Bassuener
on behalf of DPC collectively**

**Democratization Policy Council
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Since I submitted evidence to the House of Lords' Inquiry last year, the trajectory in the region has become worse across the board, with the still hopeful – yet fragile - anomaly of the chance offered by the end of the Gruevski era in Macedonia. The struggle to end the “name dispute” with Greece is proceeding in good faith but facing strong nationalist headwinds at the popular level; it deserves Britain's continued support. However, the multi-ethnic government of Zoran Zaev includes the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), an integral element of the architecture of power in the Gruevski era. Zaev and his party's perceived uncritical embrace of such an overtly clientelistic partner has led to deep disappointment among those ethnic Albanians who had hoped the post-Gruevski era would be built on criminal justice for “their Gruevski,” DUI leader Ali Ahmeti. Western encouragement for the resolution of outstanding questions regarding violent interethnic incidents under the previous government, including the still murky events in Kumanovo three years ago, are essential to realizing the promise of Euro-Atlantic integration.

Aside from the case of Macedonia, and the adoption (but yet to be implemented) of sweeping judicial reforms in Albania, there is little progress to note. All the indicators I noted to the House of Lords - including the regression in the rule of law and independent judicial systems, media freedom, and shrunken space for independent initiatives in the shadow of deepening unchecked party systems, have continued to decline, making talk of any convergence with Europe mere fantasy.

One would not draw this conclusion from the official proclamations of progress from Brussels since the EU's “new strategy” was announced in February. But, as my DPC colleague Toby Vogel has documented, the policy outlined is neither new, nor is it strategic. Instead, it is a repackaging of the standing EU policy toward the Western Balkans, based solely upon the hope that the Union's “soft power” and open door would impel improvements in liberal and accountable democratic practice, the rule of law, civic freedoms, and the overall economic environment. Any critique of local leaders for their increasingly brazen assaults on these basic elements for credibility as an EU aspirant have been muted, at best, thereby signalling the opportunity for these same leaders to act with ever more impunity. The correct perception among local leaders is that the EU and West more broadly will indulge illiberal practices at home so long as Potemkin reform checklists are delivered, to provide the illusion of progress, and in turn, the illusion of stability. This amounts to a (diplomatically worded) “kick me” sign on the back of the EU, its members, and the West as a whole.

Balkan potentates are not the only ones doing the kicking, either. The EU's doubling down on ineffectual policy has only encouraged malign illiberal actors, most visibly Russia and Turkey, but also China and the Gulf states, to penetrate the region more aggressively. President Erdoğan's election campaign rally on May 20 in Sarajevo needs to be viewed in precisely this frame: a direct challenge to Europe and the West. (And one that is even more acute in light of EU member states such as Germany and the Netherlands refusing permission for such a rally in their own countries.) It also signifies a growing tendency for Bosnia and Herzegovina's neighbours – including EU member Croatia – to involve themselves in the internal affairs of the country, which stands as the EU-led West's most humiliating and dangerous policy failure in the region.

All the general recommendations I made last year to the House of Lords' inquiry remain valid. I will not recapitulate them here in detail but rather submit them as evidence, together with my written

testimony to the US House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging threats, delivered on April 18, which focused on the dangerously escalating destabilization in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Suffice it to say that a united Western commitment to ensure peace and security, articulate and defend liberal democratic values, and assist their local exponents – particularly those already pressing from the civic and popular level, could both help ensure the Western Balkans' eventual constructive integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and prevent further sliding into institutionalized criminal authoritarianism or oligarchy.

However, my specific recommendation to the Foreign Affairs Committee in advance of the London summit of the "Berlin Process," which rightly will include a hitherto absent security dimension, aims concretely at this last point. The process needs to become intersocietal, not just intergovernmental.

From its inception to date, the Berlin Process has effectively imported the EU's code into its own software: it is based on leader-to-leader exhortations and commitments. The results, by any objective measure, are decidedly mixed at best. Should the London meeting follow this template, the outcome will simply be more of the same, whatever the differences in the agenda.

However, Britain can build on its strengths and field-based expertise in the region by convening a selection of assertive civic activists from each country for a parallel Citizen's Summit, with a premium placed on those under 30. RYCO, a laudable project to build what I have termed the "human infrastructure" of the region, also should be drawn upon, though it remains very new and functionally untested. Connecting populations of countries which have been purposely divided by war (or in Albania's case, history) and whose remaining disconnected is a vital part of sustaining the political ecosystem desired by the bulk of malign leaders regionwide.

The inclusion of civic and youth delegations to the conference should not just serve as a talking point, but form an integral, functional element of the gathering. These delegations should be given the opportunity to actively engage in plenary sessions, with all Western participants present (and moderating) with the governments of their respective countries, in turn. The focus of discussion should not be palliative projects or technical capacity needs, but an open debate on the structural impediments of democratic development based on accountable governments, empowered constituencies and independent checks and balances. By introducing this element to the Berlin Process, the UK would add *real* value to the proceedings, as well as laying down a marker for future meetings. Furthermore, the precedent set would strongly encourage the EU to follow suit in its regional meetings.

Such an innovation will, almost certainly, be resisted by the majority of Western Balkan elite participants – though if co-sponsored with Macedonian Prime Minister Zaev, whom may well embrace such a change, given the bottom-up pressure which enabled his government's eventual formation, it might be harder to resist. In the recent past, Balkan leaders have arrogantly dismissed out of hand questions from their own citizens in international fora. The London conference should break this mould and raise the bar, setting this as the price of admission to future Berlin Process conferences.

There will surely be resistance from within the FCO and other Western diplomatic corps as well – diplomats abhor unpredictability in such set-piece affairs. Tough. The unpredictability of citizens demanding public accountability of their governments is essential to the exercise of democracy. In any case, the unpredictability of civic-official interchange in this forum would inform a Western policy which remains on bureaucratic autopilot.