



EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



LEADERS' MEETINGS: FACILITATING OR REPLACING THE FORMAL POLITICAL PROCESSES IN THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES?

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INTRODUCTION

'Leaders' meetings,' an informal practice for resolving political conflicts, have become a common feature of the political systems of unconsolidated democracies in the Western Balkan countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo and Macedonia. 'Leaders' meetings' are negotiations among the major political party leaders and their delegated representatives that seek a consensual resolution of contentious issues and that occur outside formal institutions, e.g. a neutral location such as public, commercial or diplomatic premises. Formal parliamentary political institutions and processes in the Western Balkans are often incapacitated by boycotts, blockades or rejections on the part of political actors, which turn political competition into political conflict. In turn, political conflicts have created and/or intensified political crises, rendering formal institutions dysfunctional, and opening space for interventions by external actors. The deadlocks in political decision-making and the fragility of formal political institutions have led to a reliance on 'leaders' meetings' as an informal mechanism. These include both meetings of leaders themselves and 'leadership meetings,' which are attended by delegated representatives; in many cases, external actors are also involved. **The purpose of this informal practice is to deal with political disputes, which, having gone outside institutions, cannot be contained by them, so are resolved in private meetings, mainly between party leaders.**

Since the political actors involved have little faith that what they agree will be respected and implemented, it is necessary for an external actor to facilitate, mediate and guarantee the leadership negotiation process. The ability of the outside actor to facilitate and guarantee the negotiation process depends on her/his political power and ability to provide positive and negative incentives as stimuli to nudge the political actors to accept or concede the proposed position. Most commonly, this role has been performed by the president of the country or representatives of the European Union (EU) and the United States (US).

The main features of the political conflicts in these four countries in the period 2014-2016 are as follows:

Albania: The judicial reform of 2016

The dispute/conflict: Albania's judicial reform, intended to remove corrupt judges and suppress organised crime, was a top priority for the country to embark on the path to EU accession. However, the Socialist Party (SP) and the opposition Democratic Party (DP) could not agree on how the reform should be carried out. It took the two parties 18 months of negotiations, disputes and mutual accusations, as well as a meeting between the SP and the DP and constant intervention from EU and USA, to reach an agreement. Eventually, at midnight on 21 July 2016, the Albanian Parliament unanimously passed a constitutional package substantially reforming the judicial system of the country.

Internal actors: The three largest political parties: SP, DP were primary actors, and the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI) was a secondary actor.

Leaders in negotiations: Chairperson of Socialist Party of Albania, Chairperson of Democratic Party

External actors: The European Commission, through the European Commissioner for Enlargement; MEPs; the EU ambassador to Albania; and the US ambassador to Albania.

Resolution: Adoption of judicial reform by changing the Constitution of Albania with the mutual agreement of the majority and opposition. This gave a green light for the adoption of vetting procedures for the judiciary and more efficient measures against corruption and organised crime.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Adoption of the EU coordination mechanism, 2016

The dispute/conflict: Bosnia and Herzegovina's fraught history of policy decision-making and implementation is the result of its complex institutional structures, which entail overlapping authorities, and mistrust between the political actors among whom power is divided in the ethnicity-based political system. The Coordination Mechanism (CM) on EU matters is thus a response to BiH's fragmented and multi-layered formal institutional structure, as it establishes procedures for the effective coordination and implementation of EU-driven policies, and structures the interaction of the country as a whole with the EU. Despite being a key EU requirement for BiH, the adoption of the CM was hindered by the Republika Srpska (RS) leadership's view that it was a threat to the entity's position within the country. When a deal on the CM was established between the leader of the Bosniak SDA, Izetbegovic, and the leader of the Serbian SNSD, Dodik, an objection was raised by their Croatian counterpart, the leader of HDZ BiH, Covic, who regarded the CM as a threat to the position of BiH's cantons. Eventually, the CM was finalised and formally adopted, with the package being brokered through a series of leadership meetings held in the period 2015-2016, in which the EU ambassador, Wigemark, also participated.

Internal actors: The three largest political parties: Party of Democratic Action (SDA), Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) and the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BiH).

Leaders in negotiations: Chairperson of Party of Democratic Action/ Chairman of BiH Presidency; Chairperson of Alliance of Independent Social Democrats/President of RS); and Chairperson of Croatian Democratic Union/ member of BiH presidency.

External actors: EU, through its ambassador, Head of Delegation to BiH.

Resolution: The final text of the 'Decision on the system of coordination of the process of BiH's European integration' was drafted in terms that were acceptable to all sides and formally adopted by the Council of Ministers in August 2016, contributing to BiH's EU prospects.

Kosovo: The 2014 parliamentary elections

The dispute/conflict: The 2014 Kosovar parliamentary elections were evaluated overall as transparent and well-organised, but there was no clear winner and a government could not be formed for six months. The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) coalition, despite coming first in the elections, faced a challenge to form a government when the opposition parties - the Vetevendosje Movement, the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) and the Initiative for Kosovo (NISMA) - joined forces to form the so-called VLAN coalition, thus becoming the majority political force in the Assembly. The VLAN coalition claimed the right to form a government as they had the majority of seats. However, the PDK coalition persisted, arguing that they had won the plurality of votes in the elections and thus had the right to form the government. Eventually, a Constitutional Court of Kosovo ruling granted the PDK coalition, rather than the VLAN post-election coalition, the power to form the government.

Internal actors: Political parties who won seats in the Assembly of Kosovo in the 2014 national elections: PDK, LDK, AAK, NISMA, Vetëvendosje.

Leaders in negotiations: Chairperson of Democratic League of Kosovo; Chairperson of Vetevendosje; Chairperson of Alliance for the Future; Chairperson of Social Democratic Initiative; Chairperson of Democratic Party of Kosovo.

External actors: The German ambassador; the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative for Southeast Europe; the UK ambassador; the US ambassador.

Resolution: The rupture between the leaders of the LDK and the AAK over the Prime Minister's post led to the disintegration of the VLAN coalition. The LDK then joined the PDK and the deadlock was broken.

Macedonia: The 2014 parliamentary elections and 2014-2016 political crisis

The dispute/conflict: The credibility of the 2014 parliamentary elections was rejected by the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)-led opposition, which abandoned formal political processes and boycotted Parliament, claiming that state institutions had been captured by the much more powerful VMRO-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE). After a period of stagnation, SDSM's release of wiretapped conversations of political elites in February 2015 triggered a process of leaders' and leadership meetings for resolving the political conflict, facilitated by the EU and the US. Political party leaders and their representatives were in continuous negotiations until August 2016. Ultimately, they reached an agreement to implement measures in the electoral, judicial and media systems that guaranteed the trust of all parties in these institutions before new parliamentary elections were held.

Internal actors: The four largest political parties: VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM were primary actors, and the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) and Democratic Party of Albanians secondary actors.

Leaders in negotiations: Chairperson of VMRO-DPMNE; Chairperson of Social Democratic Union of Macedonia; Chairperson of Democratic Union for Integration; and Chairperson of Democratic Party of Albanians.

External actors: European Commission, through the European Commissioner for Enlargement; the USA, through the US ambassador; and MEPs.

Resolution: The Przino Political Agreement, which introduced: a special public prosecutor, electoral reform measures, media reform measures, an interim technical government, an end to the release of wiretapped conversations, and parliamentary elections which took place on 11 December 2016.

Conclusions

Analysis of the practice of leaders' and leadership meetings in Albania, BiH, Kosovo, and Macedonia has led to the following conclusions:

- 1) Political elites in the Western Balkans region are often unable to address political disputes through regular political processes and within the formal political institutions, which exacerbates political conflicts and crises. When such situations arise, **leaders'/leadership meetings have been an effective informal process for overcoming political conflicts and crises**. Leaders' meetings usually include the leaders of the largest parliamentary parties, the most politically powerful individuals, who can resolve the political conflict and return the process to the formal institutions. Leadership meetings involve their delegated representatives, who discuss and negotiate the contested issues.
- 2) The **physical setting** of the leaders'/leadership meetings is often **informal** and generally includes neutral ground outside the formal institutions.

- 3) Leaders'/leadership meetings **often include strong involvement of external actor(s) who have the political power and authority to mediate the negotiation and guarantee the resolution.** This role may be played by the president of the country or - more commonly, and with greater success - representatives of the international community, including the European Commission, the European Parliament and the US. International actors appear to function more successfully than domestic actors as guarantors of agreements.
- 4) Due to the inability of political elites in the region to reach agreements within formal political settings, **leaders' meetings circumvent the institutions of the political system, seeking more neutral ground and causing a 'spill-over' effect in the political process.**
- 5) As a result of leaders'/leadership meetings, **political decision-making becomes more centralised, less inclusive and non-transparent.** Besides the bypassing of institutional arrangements, crucial information is often withheld from the public in order to avoid further political turmoil.
- 6) **The decisions made during the leaders'/leadership meetings are formalised through their adoption and implementation by formal political institutions.**
- 7) Leaders'/leadership meetings serve some sort of '**substitutive**' function, i.e. domestic political actors and the international community have the same goal - reaching a political decision in a political context of dysfunctional formal institutions.
- 8) Leaders'/leadership meetings never perform a pre-emptive function; that is, they do not aim to forestall political crises in the region. Rather, **leaders'/leadership meetings occur mostly at moments when various political crises have either reached a climax or are at an advanced phase.** This means that they rarely take place unless a crucial political issue has already reached a dead-end, regardless of the nature of the issue (judicial reform, coordination mechanism, elections or political negotiations related to a general political crisis, etc.).
- 9) In all cases, **EU and USA** representatives deploy a similar diplomatic strategy of '**carrot and stick**' politics.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Leaders'/leadership meetings are an effective way of overcoming political crisis in the countries of the Western Balkans. In this regard, the practicality of utilising this format is undeniable when it comes to efficient decision-making in times of turbulent crises. However, in the long run, leaders'/leadership meetings create political side effects that can be damaging to the countries in the region.

First, they create a long-term dependency on the actors of the international community, meaning that domestic political players prefer relying on external help for resolving polarising political issues to seeking a solution within the institutional setup. This decreases their incentive to internalise political processes and increases the 'template' logic of resolving political issues with mediation by the US and the EU. Furthermore, frequent utilisation of leaders'/leadership meetings decreases confidence in domestic political institutions, meaning that they are seen merely as implementing agents of decisions which

have been made during leaders'/leadership meetings in a centralised, non-inclusive and non-transparent manner.

Based on our analysis, several policy recommendations may be offered:

- 1) **Leaders'/leadership meetings should be used as a pre-emptive mechanism.** Their purpose should thus be altered: instead of using the format as a damage control mechanism, they **should serve to strengthen political dialogue, foster consensus-building on major political issues and prevent political crisis.** Forestalling potentially damaging and polarising political issues through leaders'/leadership meetings is more conducive to building healthy democracies in the Western Balkans than engaging in damage control once political processes are already out of control and outside formal political structures.
- 2) **The countries of the Western Balkans, in cooperation with international community actors, should develop early warning mechanisms** to predict possible shortcomings of the political processes that might generate political crises. Early prediction of political crises can lead to more effective management of political challenges and, in the long run, can result in increased confidence in the institutions of the political system.
- 3) **A consensus-seeking body, most appropriately in Parliament, for key strategic matters should be established** within the formal institutional framework of the countries, so that political dialogue can be sustained inside institutions and addressed through formal channels. Such a body could be part of the solution to prevent such political conflicts in future. The purpose of this body is to make use of those elements of leadership meetings that are helpful (dialogue, problem resolution, enhanced trust among political opponents) while reducing those elements that are damaging (secrecy, displacement of the role of legal decision-making institutions, dependence on outside intervention).

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

The evidence for this brief is based on a qualitative methodology, namely process tracing through interviews with actors involved in the leaders'/leadership meetings in all four case studies, and archival research. The case studies include the judicial reform in Albania in 2016, the adoption of the EU coordination mechanism in Bosnia and Herzegovina 2015-2016, Kosovo's parliamentary elections in 2014 and the political crisis in Macedonia 2014-2016.

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FURTHER READING	Bliznakovski, J., Gjuzelov, B. and Popovikj, M. (2017) Report on Informal Life of Political Parties in the Western Balkan Societies. Institute for Democracy ‘Societas Civilis’ Skopje. Popovikj, M., Gjuzelov, B. and Bliznakovski, J. (2018) How to sustainably decrease clientelism and ensure fair political competition in the WB? The case for introducing standing parliamentary committees. Institute for Democracy ‘Societas Civilis’ Skopje. Damjanovski, I. and Kmezic, M. (2018) Implementation of EU rules in the Western Balkans