



Parliamentary Seminar on the Western Balkans

10 – 12 September 2018

UK Parliament

Summary Conclusions from the Chair

- I would like to thank all the delegations for their active participation and engagement in the issues discussed over the last three days. This has been an open dialogue with frank, respectful and constructive exchanges among fellow parliamentarians from both the Western Balkans and other European parliaments. This is just a short summary of the final report which will be circulated in the coming weeks, along with the official conference photos and any additional documentation requested by delegates
- We opened the Seminar with the former NATO Secretary-General, Rt Hon Lord Robertson of Port Ellen KT, who impressively set the scene for discussions to come, as he highlighted the unique role of parliaments in promoting and pursuing the aims of the Berlin Process. He described this as a moment of 'now or never' for many countries and one which had to be seized by all.
- We then heard from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), who reported back on the outcomes of the Western Balkans Summit hosted by the UK in London in July 2018. It was noted how this year's Summit differed from previous meetings in that there was an increased role played by young people and civil society and that there was the introduction of a meeting between Interior Ministers, which focussed on shared security concerns. Delegates welcomed this BGIPU initiative to follow up the Summit and highlighted their shared desire for the role of parliaments to be strengthened in the Berlin Process in support of regional cooperation and the aspirations of Western Balkans countries for membership of all key European institutions. To this end, Bulgaria also announced that they will be jointly hosting with the European Parliament an inter-parliamentary meeting on the Western Balkans in October, and it is very much hoped this trend of regional parliamentary meetings continues, particularly as follow-up to the annual Summits.
- The key role to be played by parliaments was also reiterated during the discussions on the UK's two Select Committee reports which provided very useful examples of how Parliaments can work to hold government policy on the Western Balkans to effective account. We also heard repeated calls for stronger alliances and networks between Western Balkan parliaments to ensure there could be a robust inter-parliamentary component to such accountability efforts in the face of ongoing challenges in the region, as highlighted by Rt Hon Lord Ashdown of Norton-sub-Hamdon GCMG KBE CH, former High Representative for Bosnia & Herzegovina.



Parliamentary Seminar on the Western Balkans

10 – 12 September 2018

UK Parliament

- The second day started with a focus on more specific issues, such as democracy, rule of law and anti-corruption. Challenges noted by delegates included legislation being passed to improve democracy working in theory but not necessarily in practice, the high number of political parties making consensus difficult to obtain and the need to improve parliamentary education and parliamentary ethics. A need to improve public perceptions of parliaments and politicians was also seen as vital to bolster faith in the democratic processes. Parliamentary support mechanisms, including through the UK's new programme of support offered through the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, were also highlighted.
- We discussed the need for anti-corruption measures across all levels of society, with a focus on the difficulties facing minority governments to push through the necessary legislation and reforms to effectively fight corruption. While many countries have made successful reforms on this front, there is still some way to go to improve concrete action to tackle corruption across the region. The need for judicial reform was noted by several delegations, with the backlog of cases causing significant problems in the judicial systems.
- We then looked at the importance of including young people and women in the political processes and in parliaments, with RYCO's unique network of young people and outreach to parliamentarians being positive steps forward to have better regional connections and cooperation. Delegates then noted the specific challenges experienced by women as parliamentarians, either by the glass ceiling they so often face or by having to deal with negative portrayals in the media. Women and young people need to always be on the political agenda, and not just in the run up to elections to appeal to voters. Once more, there was the suggestion of a regional network – this time of women MPs - to come together to better improve the experience of women parliamentarians. There was also the mention of a need to include parliamentarians with disabilities and ethnic minorities in discussions.
- The session on civil society positively highlighted the role of parliamentary engagement with civil society. In terms of LGBTI rights, it was noted that whilst anti-discrimination legislation is in place in almost all the countries in the region, there is still much to be done to ensure the LGBTI community has the same rights as others. In terms of media engagement with parliamentarians, a stark contrast between efficient and inefficient parliamentarians was noted, but delegates were encouraged to be curious and not to be afraid of reaching out to the media. Civil society cannot be overlooked in terms of the positive impact it can make on legislation and the assistance they can provide to parliamentarians in terms of advocacy and policy research.



Parliamentary Seminar on the Western Balkans

10 – 12 September 2018

UK Parliament

- The third and final day has focussed on broader regional issues, such as this morning's session on economic cooperation. There was a summary of the key challenges which exist in the region which deter foreign investment, followed by a discussion on the RCC'S Multi-Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area. The need to develop specific skills for young people was highlighted, with a focus on computer literacy and digital skills. The discussions then moved to what parliamentarians could specifically do to facilitate improved economic cooperation, and how having this regional approach could benefit all by making it easier to operate within the region and to deter young people from leaving the region because of a lack of opportunity. The British Council's '21st Century Schools Programme' was welcomed as a practical contribution to addressing this challenge.
- Discussions then addressed how best to increase and improve security cooperation, with the Minister for Security and Economic Crime, Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP, sharing his thoughts on the London Summit and common security challenges and threats. We were particularly grateful to the Minister for hosting the Welcome Reception for the Seminar at Lancaster House as a sign of the UK Government's support for continuing parliamentary engagement in the Berlin Process. He highlighted the importance of having the meeting between the Western Balkan Interior Ministers to discuss such important issues as information sharing and tackling organised crime. These points were reiterated in discussions, and the OSCE PA was noted as another effective mechanism for parliamentarians to work together in an international context on addressing mutual concerns facing both Western Balkans and other European countries.
- The following session focussed on regional migration challenges, looking at the need to find solutions for the people moving through the Western Balkans – either because of forced migration or because of economic migration. The frameworks required to help these people, such as the necessary legislation or asylum policies, were noted, and delegates were particularly encouraged to meet with these people or visit the facilities which have been provided to them to get a true understanding of the reality so many people face.
- Attention then turned to the need to resolve outstanding legacy issues in the Western Balkans, such as missing persons and resolving bilateral disputes. This was looked at in terms of the programmes on the ground as well as how progress on sensitive issues and improved understanding could be advanced through taking a regional approach, including regarding Leaders' commitments at the London Summit to advance common goals.



Parliamentary Seminar on the Western Balkans

10 – 12 September 2018

UK Parliament

- Finally, we discussed the crucial role that soft power can play in promoting understanding through culture, education and broadcast media and in strengthening people to people links and welcomed presentations by the British Council and the West Balkans Fund on their highly valued activities in the region. We noted that the countries of the Western Balkans are exceptionally strong in the areas of music, heritage, art and tourism potential and delegates recognised how these soft power strengths played a key role in transforming outdated perceptions of the region across the world.
- There have been some recurring themes emerging from our discussions over the last three days on how parliaments can better engage with the Berlin Process and the annual Western Balkans Summits. Above all else, there has been strong recognition of the importance of increased parliamentary cooperation and dialogue, which could be done via informal or formal networks. It was noted early in the discussions that this increased dialogue should take place in the Western Balkans region itself and so, building on the notion of people to people links, we hope that these conversations can continue once you have returned to your parliaments and that – in the spirit of the IPU – this parliamentary friendship and dialogue will continue and flourish.