



NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY OF WESTERN BALKAN PARLIAMENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE BERLIN PROCESS

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Introduction

The role of the Parliaments in the Berlin Process (BP) and the broader integration of the Western Balkan (WB) countries in the European Union is a crucial aspect of the region's development. The Parliaments are the main institution that represent the voice of the citizens and should always work for the benefits of the its constituencies. Regional development would improve the lives of the citizens in economic, social and political sense. However, the Parliaments role often on national level and this role has only limited presence in regional frames. The Berlin Process confirms that Parliaments are rarely included in full in regional initiatives.

The acknowledgment of the value of including Parliaments in the Berlin Process at the Poznań Summit in 2019 was a positive step. However, the lack of concrete actions, such as interparliamentary meetings, in the years following the summit highlights a void that needs to be filled.

Given the importance of regional cooperation and integration in the EU, harnessing the knowledge and expertise of WB think tanks and increasing the involvement of Parliaments could indeed bring added value to the Berlin Process. It would not only contribute to further strengthening of existing regional cooperation but will also ensure that the Process is more inclusive and representative of the broader political landscape in the Western Balkans.

The role of the Parliaments in the WB

The Parliaments can play a distinct role within the BP framework. In addition to the legislative, oversight and control, and representation functions, Parliaments may apply parliamentary diplomacy in order to exert pressure on governments to push forward the Berlin process, the alignment with the EU acquis and the implementation of reforms necessary for EU accession to the EU, ensuring that government actions align with EU standards and norms. In that regard, Parliaments play a vital role in ensuring that the legal framework of these countries meets the EU standards.

Parliaments also serve as a platform for political dialogue within and between countries. The role of the Parliaments within the BP can be seen as a diplomacy platform where Members of Parliament (MPs) discuss common challenges and solutions, fostering cooperation and reconciliation in the region. Furthermore, Parliaments help promote the EU integration agenda among citizens and stakeholders, as their constituency. They communicate the benefits of EU accession and the importance of reforms to meet the EU standards. This communication is essential for building public trust and support for EU integration in the respective countries. Parliaments are also engaging with civil society organizations and think tanks to ensure that their perspectives and concerns are taken into consideration in the accession process. This contributes to inclusive policy-making and helps ensure that the interests of all stakeholders are considered.

Overall, the role of the Parliaments in the Berlin Process is multi-faceted. From legislative harmonization and oversight to promoting regional cooperation and engaging with civil society - their active involvement is essential for successful integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU.



About the project

The inclusion of Parliaments in the BP institutional framework will be of added value and it will also strengthen the role of the Parliament in the EU integration process in each of the Western Balkan countries. The project aims to strengthen the capacities of the MPs and the parliamentary staff in order to exercise their legislative and oversight role over the commitments undertaken under the BP auspices.

In terms of objectives of this project, the short survey aims to identify the needs of both - the MPs and parliamentary staff - regarding their substantive involvement in the Berlin Process and in advancing regional cooperation.

The questionnaire was distributed and answered by the Members of Parliaments and parliamentary staff from all Western Balkan countries between 1 November, 2023 – 31 December, 2023. A total of 103 respondents have taken part in the survey.

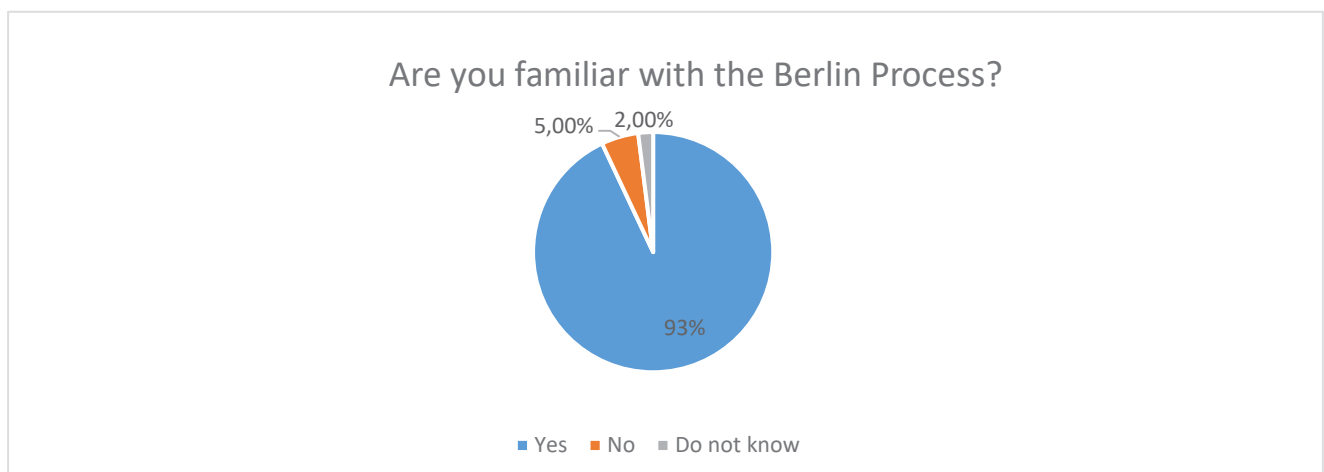
Findings

The questionnaire is split in two different parts, where the former delves into the general knowledge of the MPs and parliamentary staff on the Berlin Process, while the latter explores their perception of the role and capacities required for the Parliaments' involvement in the BP.

Understanding of the Berlin Process from WB Parliaments' point of view

The analysis starts with general perceptions of the respondents on the Berlin Process. This part includes their understanding of what the Process represents, the successes and failures and what are the main objectives.

The results show strong familiarity with the BP. Almost all the respondents (93%) gave affirmative answer to the question. These results match the survey conducted by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) from 2020 which confirms that there is a good familiarity with the process among parliamentarians of WB.¹

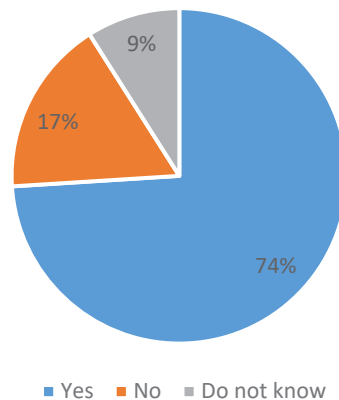


¹ Regional Cooperation Council, Strengthening the Role of Parliaments of the Western Balkans Region in the Berlin Process, 2020



However, the true understanding of the process can only be measured with deeper exploration of the initiatives and commitments that have been undertaken. According to the survey results, a significant majority of the respondents (74%) are familiar with the main responsibilities, while a minor percentage (17%) indicated they are not acquainted with them.

Are you familiar with the main commitments your respective country has undertaken as part of the Berlin Process?



When asked about more details, in an open-end question, strong majority of the respondents (61%) relate BP with the mobility agreements. Since the BP Summit in 2023, the mobility agreements have been publicly promoted in each of the WB countries. Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro have ratified the three agreements that concern ID travel within the region, recognition of academic qualifications and recognition of qualifications for certain professions, while Bosnia and Herzegovina is the only one that has not ratified all three agreement - the agreement on ID travel within the region did not entered into force as it was not ratified in the Parliament.²

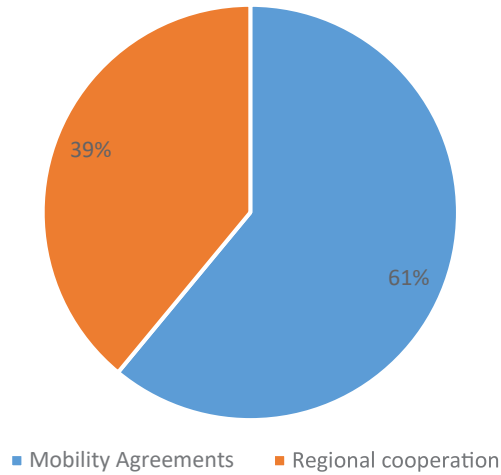
The second suggested answer (39%) is the concept of regional cooperation, which is the underlying objective of the BP. However, this answer is rather general, and does not indicate concrete knowledge of the current commitments within the Process.³

² Cooperation and Development Institute, Further Progress on the Mobility Agreement in the WB under CRM Available at <https://cdinsti-tute.eu/2023/10/26/further-progress-on-mobility-agreements-in-the-western-balkans-under-the-common-regional-market/>

³ Zoran Nechev, Gentiola Madhi, Adnan Ćerimagić and Jovan Nicić, The Berlin Process. What worked and what did not work? And why? 2017. Available at: <https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/The-Berlin-process-EFB-2017-FINAL-WEB-VERSION-1.pdf>

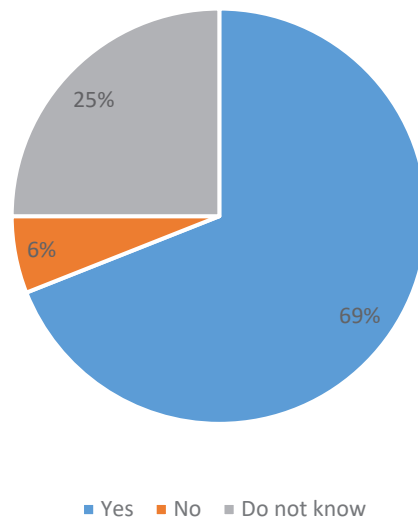


If 'yes', can you name some of them?



Additionally, one question in the survey is dedicated to the respondents' opinion on how successful is the process. The Balkan region is no stranger to many regional initiatives trying to reconcile and improve the citizens standard. ⁴ As 2024 marks the 10th anniversary of the Berlin Process, there is a need to show tangible impact that was brought to the region by this initiative. When it comes to the respondents' opinions on this question, more than two-thirds of them (69%) view the Berlin Process as a successful initiative. A significant percentage of the respondents (25%) cannot provide an answer to this question which might mean that they do not have sufficient information on its impact.

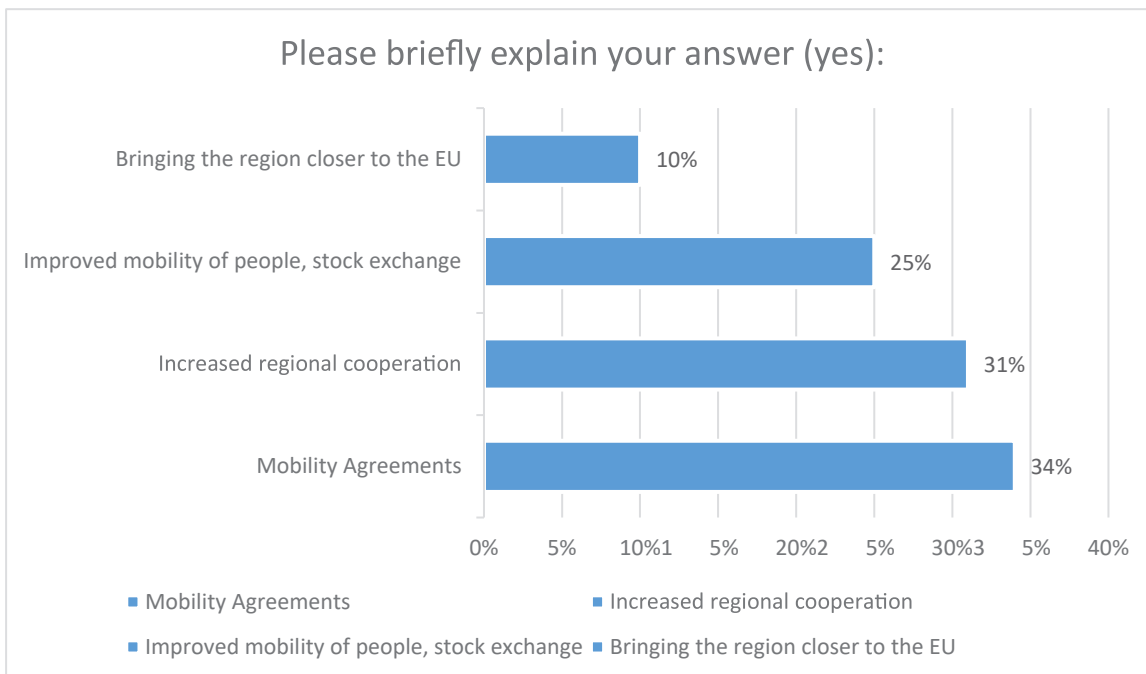
Do you see the Berlin Process as a successful initiative?



⁴ Džananović et al, The Actual Impact of Regional Organisations and Initiatives in the Western Balkans, 2021. Available at https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/A5_The-Actual-Impact-of-Regional-Organizations-and-Initiatives-on-Regional-Cooperation-Integration-and-Good-Neighborly-Relations-in-the-Western-Balkans-Success-and-Limiting-Factors.pdf



In order to understand the factors contributing to its success, the questionnaire delves into the perception about the most successful outcomes of the Berlin Process. The mobility agreements (34%), increased regional cooperation (31%), and facilitated exchange of people, goods, and ideas (25%) are cited as key aspects of the Berlin Process that make it successful. Additionally, 10% of the respondents believe that this initiative represents an important step towards the region's alignment with the EU. While these answers are somewhat general, they indicate an understanding among respondents that the Berlin Process aligns with the EU integration process and will assist Western Balkan countries in their EU accession process.



Great number of respondents believe that the Process has achieved certain results, however, it faces occasional criticism. The BP has often been a victim to bilateral issues that slow down decision-making processes and/or their implementation.⁵ As an initiative that has been 10 years in the making, the results often remain on diplomatic level and the implementation part is stagnant. Therefore, it is not surprising that the respondents are doubting its success. One of the reasons given by the respondents is the lack of concrete results from the initiative (45%), followed by failure to meet the commitments (30%).

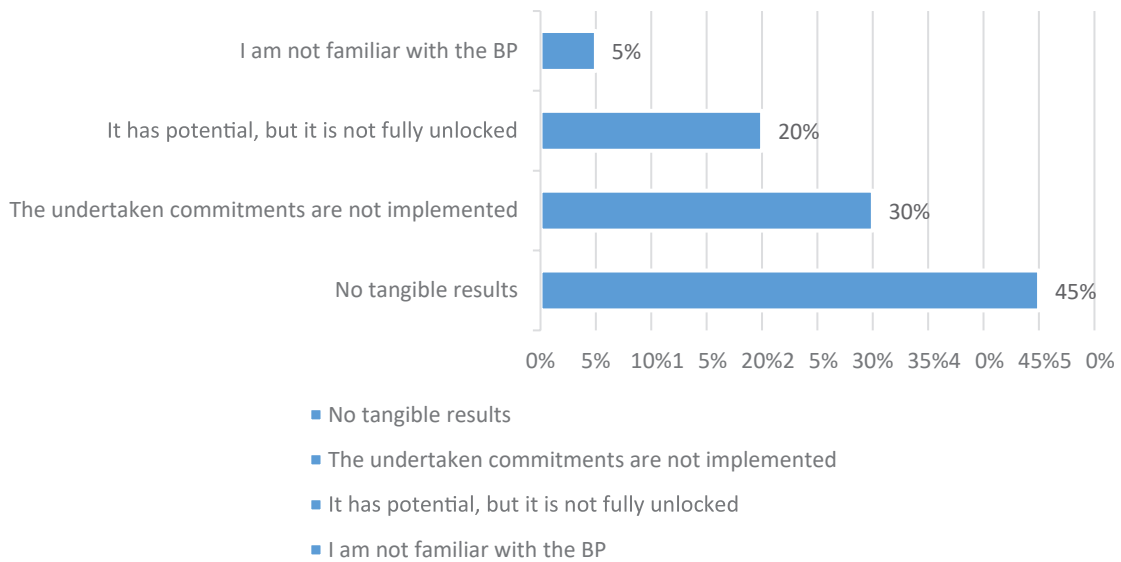
The next question analyzes the respondents' opinions on the importance of the Berlin Process for the development and integration of the country in the EU. The answers confirm the previous views that the Berlin Process is an important step towards the region's approximation to the EU. Forty seven percent of the respondents consider the Berlin Process highly relevant for the development and integration of the WB into the EU, while 46% of the respondents believe the process is relevant but think there are other questions that should be given priority.

It is very important to note that the Parliaments' respondents do not believe that the BP is irrelevant for the development and the EU integration.

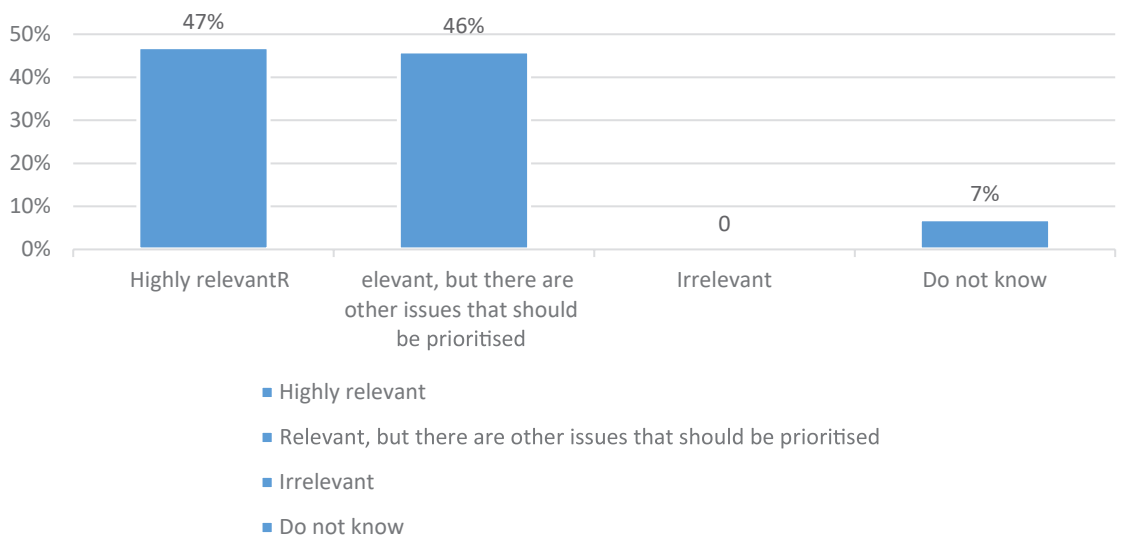
⁵ Marika Djolai, How to capitalize on the relative success of the Berlin Process, 2022. Available at: <https://www.biepag.eu/blog/how-to-capitalise-on-the-relative-success-of-the-berlin-process/>



Please briefly explain your answer (no):



How would you assess the importance of the Berlin Process for the development and EU integration of the country:

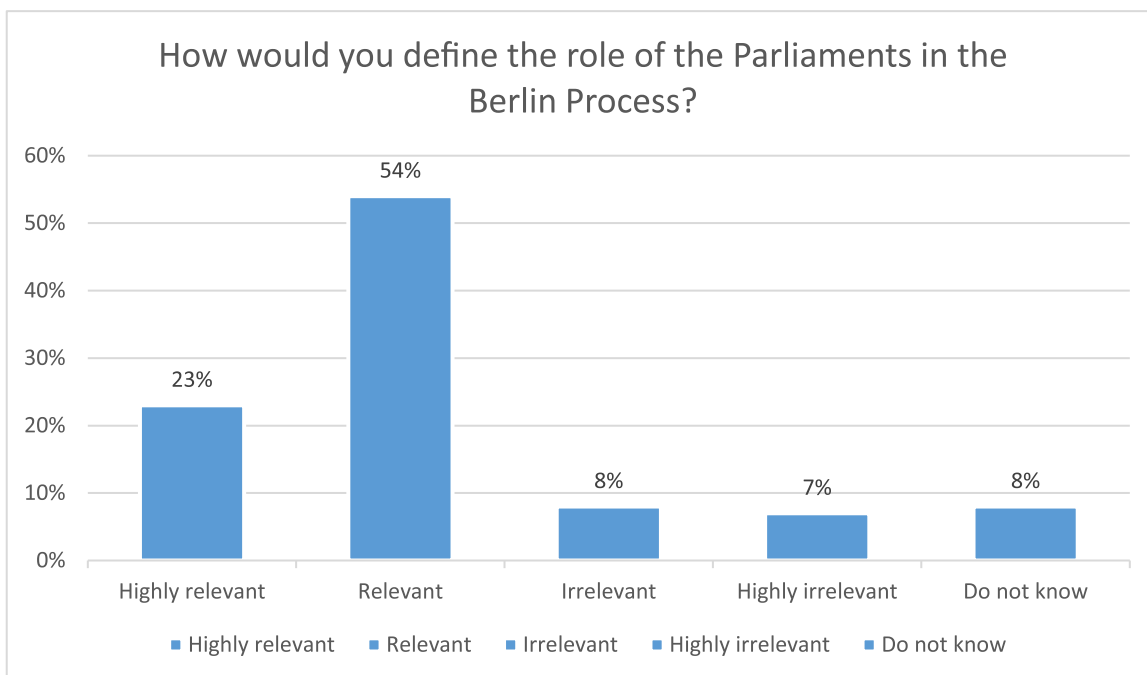




The role of the Parliaments

The general perception on the BP paints the broader picture of Parliaments' understanding and familiarity with the process. However, institutionalizing their role beyond the ratification of the Agreements on national level (apart from Albania) would require bigger capacities of the Parliaments. Although institutionalization of the Parliaments' involvement will depend on other stakeholders who are already involved in the Process, the Parliaments must request involvement based on their preferences, capabilities, and capacities. For these reasons, the questionnaire tries to figure out into their perception of their role in the Berlin Process.

When asked How would you define the role of Parliaments in the Berlin Process?, a strong majority (77%) consider the role of Parliaments to be relevant to a certain extent. Small number of the respondents (15%) consider that it is irrelevant to a certain extent.



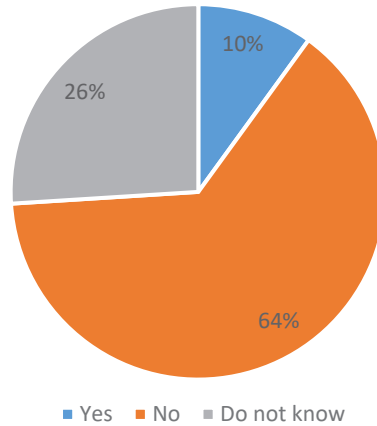
The following question explores the respondents' general views on the current role of the Parliaments in the Berlin Process, whether they are satisfied with their role. The results show that more than two-thirds of respondents are not satisfied with the current role of Parliaments in the process (64%) followed by a quarter of the respondents (26%) who are uncertain of their role in the Process. Only a 10% of the respondents are content with their role. Such perspectives have been discussed on several conferences where it has been stressed that the role of the Parliaments in BP needs to be formalized, and thus expanded. As of now, the MPs are involved in project activities and other regional bodies for interparliamentary cooperation.

However, in 2023, at the Conference "The role of the Parliaments in the Berlin Process", MPs from all six WB countries have agreed on declaration for strengthening their role in the BP⁶ which is the first written document by the Parliaments requiring formal engagement in the BP.

⁶ Conference on the Role of the Parliaments in the Berlin Process took place October 13, 2023. Available at: <https://www.berlinprocess.de/en/conference-on-the-role-of-the-parliaments-in-the-berlin-process-took-place-october-13>

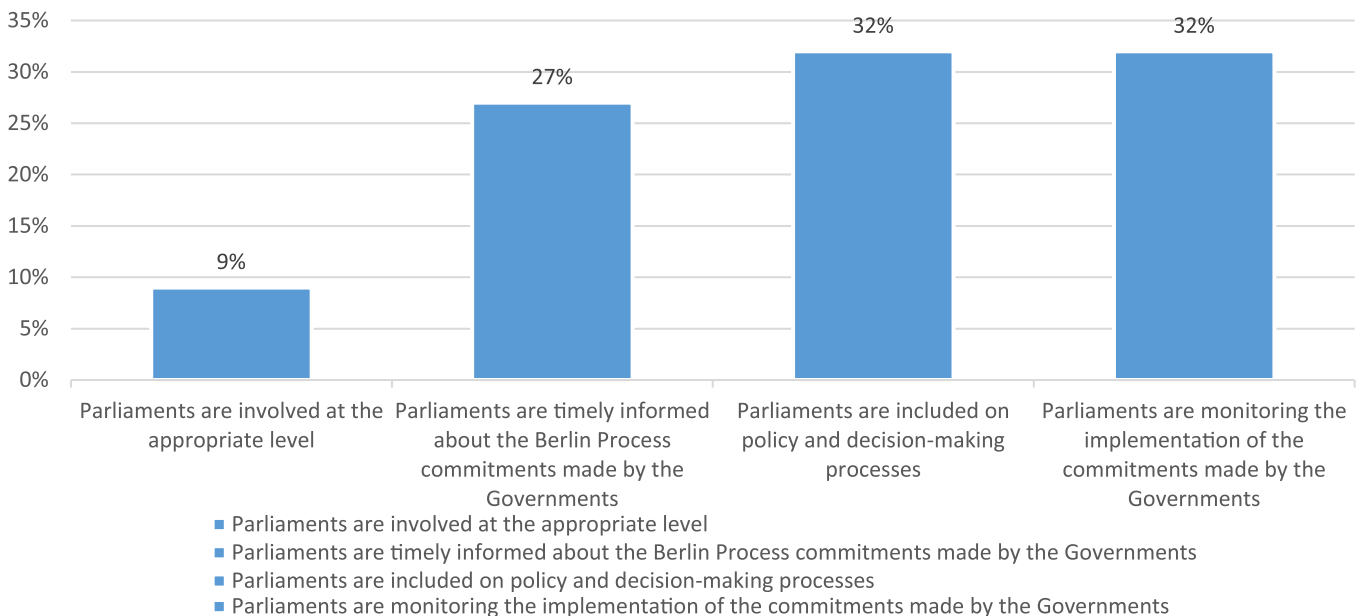


Are you satisfied with the current role of the Parliaments in BP?



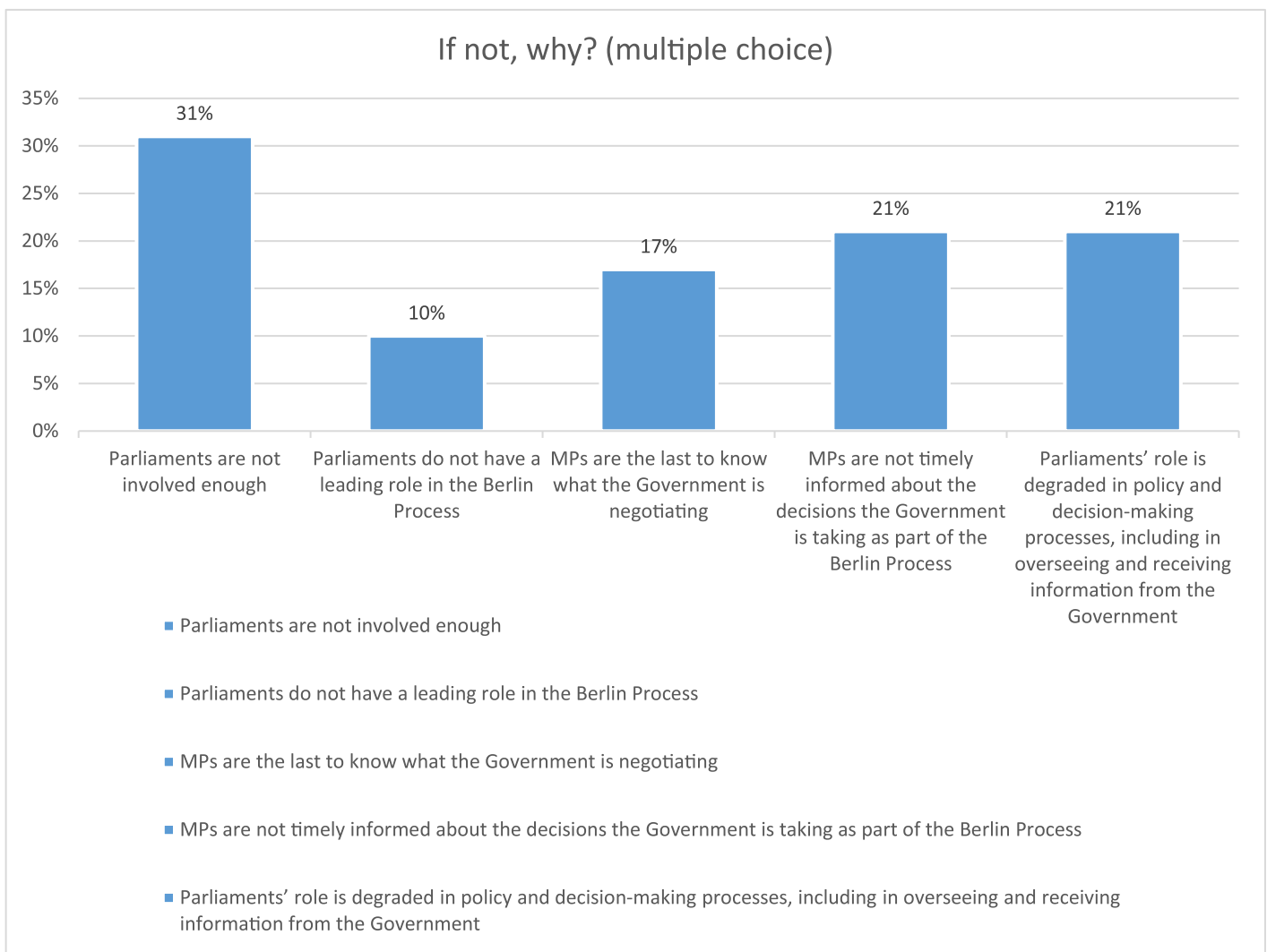
To complement the previous question, the respondents were asked to outline their understanding of the role they play. The first sub-question is probing into the details of those who are satisfied with their role within the Process. The reasons stated why they believe their role is on a good level is divided in several answers. One third (32%) believes that the Parliaments are following the implementation of the commitments undertaken by the Governments, and identical number (32%) of respondents believe that the Parliaments are involved in the decision-making of policies and conclusions. Almost similar number of respondents also believe that they are timely informed about the undertaken commitments by the Governments. This is quite an optimistic perception of the respondents, as no current case studies can support these opinions, and the Parliaments are not formally included in the processes nor are actively monitoring the implementation of the commitments.

If yes, why? (multiple choice)





Furthermore, we analysed the pool of respondents which are not satisfied with their role in the Process. One third of them (31%) believe that their role is not fulfilled because they are not sufficiently involved, followed by 21% who believe that the Parliaments' role is degraded in the policy and decision-making processes, including in overseeing and receiving information from the Government. Equal percentage (21%) believe that they are not timely informed about the decisions in which the Governments are taking part. Some of the other reasons stated by the respondents why they feel they are not satisfied is the fact that they are the last to know about the country's negotiations (17%) and they lack a leading role in the BP (10%).

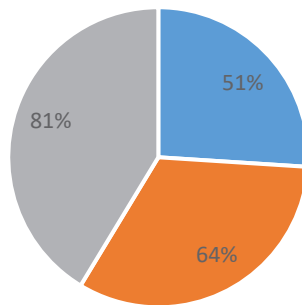


After identifying the general perception of the role of the Parliaments in the Berlin Process, the next section of the analysis examines the respondents' attitudes towards the desired involvement of the Parliaments in the Berlin Process.

When asked "What should be the role of the Parliaments in the Berlin Process?", a strong majority of 81% believe that Parliaments should monitor the implementation of commitments, 64% believe that Parliaments should participate in the Berlin Process summits, while 51% believes that Parliaments should monitor and oversee the implementation of the commitments.



What do you think the role of the Parliaments in the BP should be? (multiple choice)

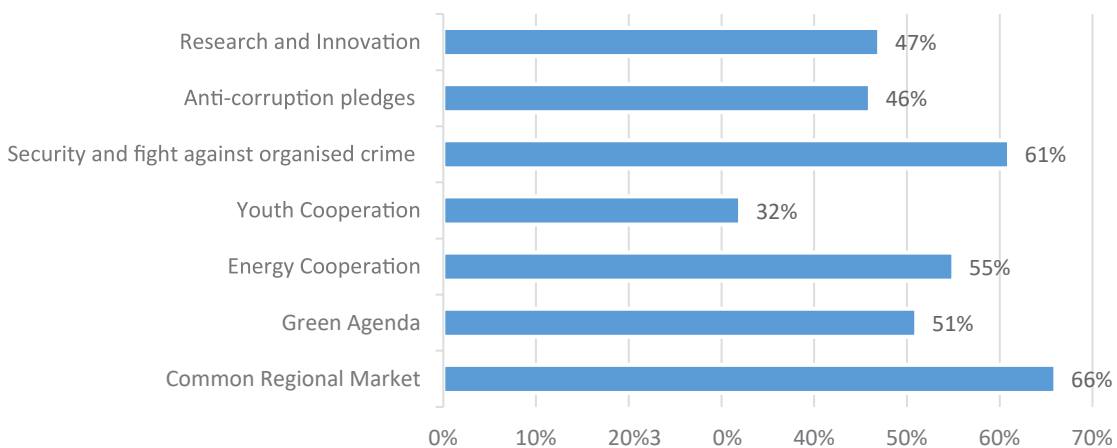


- Direct involvement in planning the Berlin Process commitments
- Participation on BP Summits
- Monitor and oversight of implementation of commitments

The total percentage does not equal 100% because respondents have the option to choose multiple answers.

When it comes to Berlin Process areas that require greater expertise and/or clarification, more than two-thirds (66%) of the respondents identified the Common Regional Market, followed by security and combating organized crime (61%), followed by energy cooperation (55%), the green agenda (51%), research and innovation (47%), anticorruption efforts (46%), and youth cooperation (32%).

In what areas of the Berlin Process do you need more clarification and/or expertise? (multiple choice)

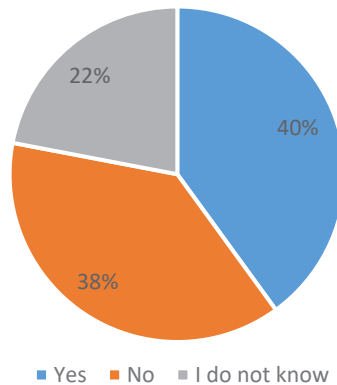


- Common Regional Market
- Energy Cooperation
- Security and fight against organised crime
- Research and Innovation
- Green Agenda
- Youth Cooperation
- Anti-corruption pledges



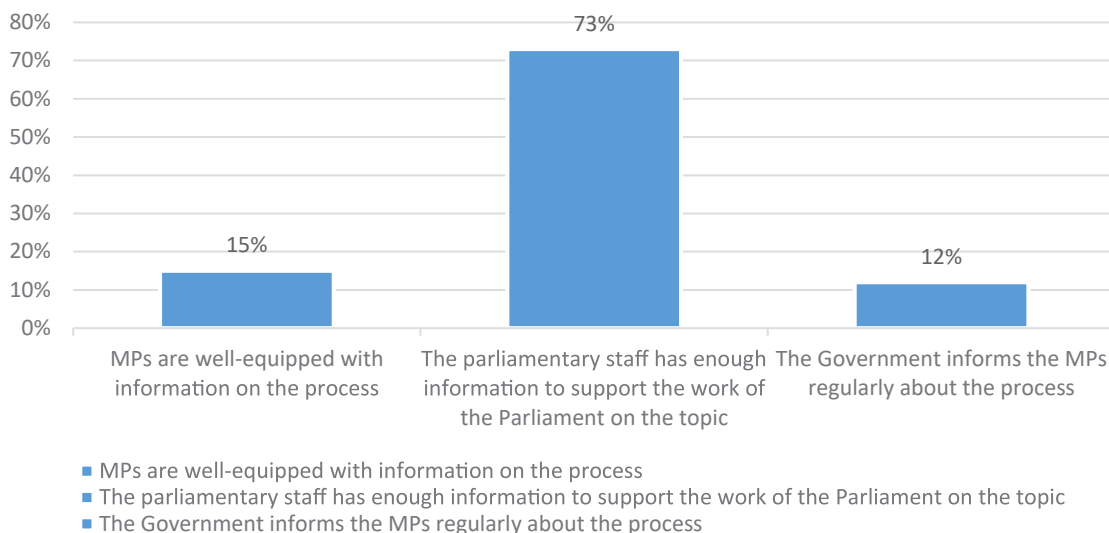
With the results of the survey, we aim to understand the gaps in the knowledge of the Parliaments that would enable their greater involvement. However, they are divided whether they have enough capacities or not, which points out to the lack of knowledge/understanding of the Process and of the respective obligation that stems out of, or should stem out from, the increased participation in BP. Forty percent believe that the Parliaments have the capacity, while 38% believe that the Parliaments do not have the capacity and information to exercise parliamentary oversight over the Berlin Process.

Do you think that the Parliaments have the capacities and information to conduct parliamentary oversight over the Berlin Process?



In terms of respondents who believe that the Parliaments have the capacity, their main argument for this attitude is that the Parliamentary staff has sufficient information to support the work of the Parliaments on this issue (73%). However, based on the regional events and the conclusions of the attendees on both regional and local events it is evident that the Parliaments do not have the capacities to be welcoming to the provided information so adding the BP engagement to their current workload will be a burden.

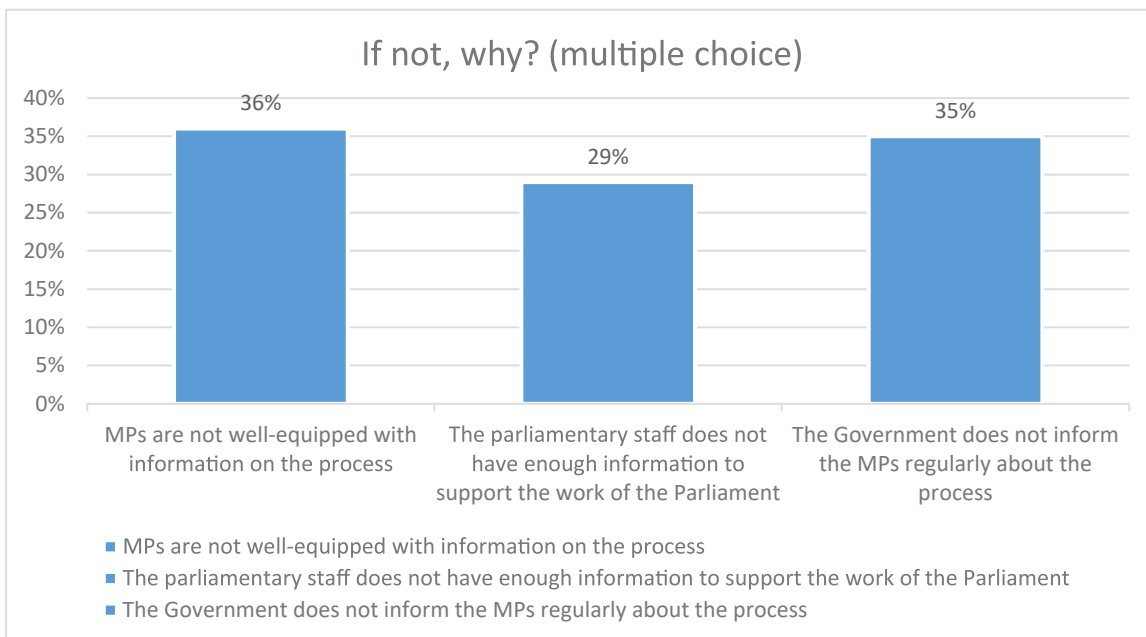
If yes, why? (multiple choice)



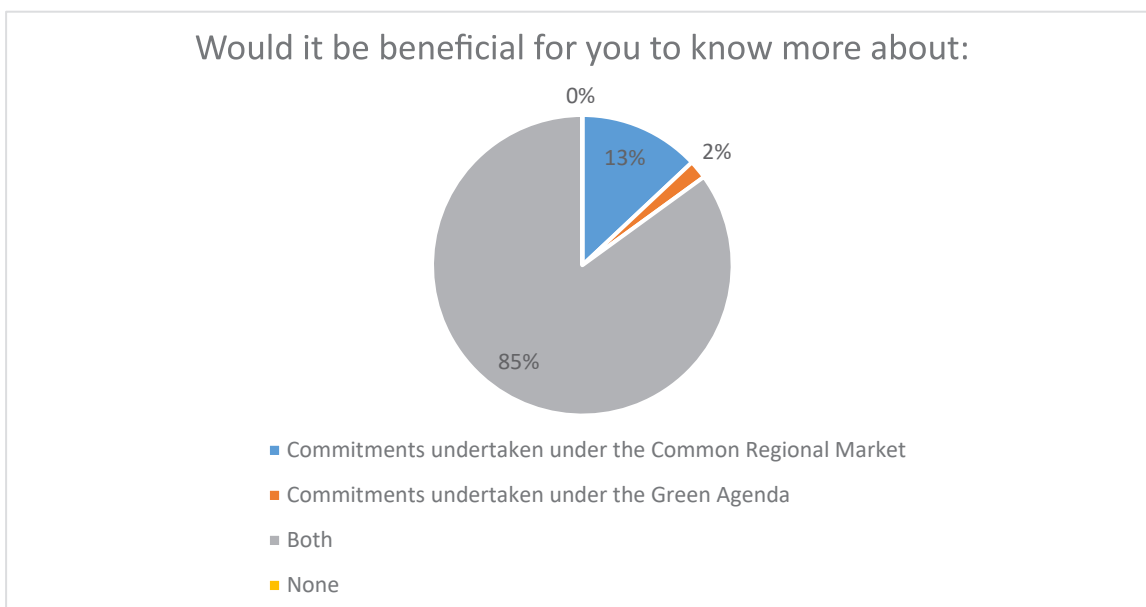


Needs Assessment Survey of Western Balkan Parliaments' involvement in the Berlin Process

The pool of respondents who believe that the Parliaments do not have the capacity, argument their answer by stating that the MPs do not have enough information about the process (36%), the government does not regularly inform the MPs about the process (35%), and the Parliamentary staff does not have enough information to support the Parliament's work (29%).



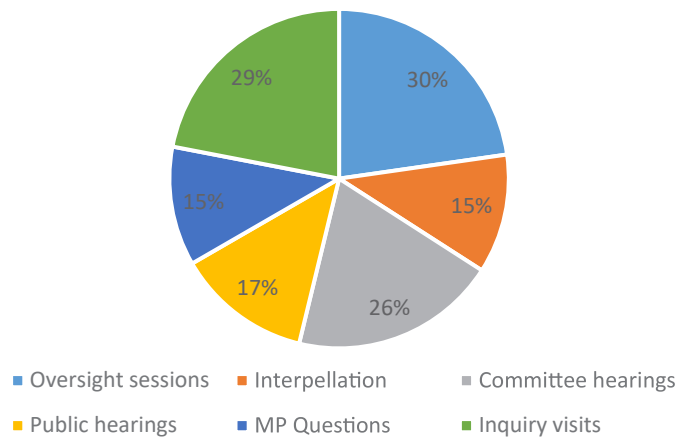
Finally, the Parliaments are not inclined towards certain topics of the BP, but they rather perceive all areas as equally important. There is a strong consensus (85%) among the respondents that they consider it very useful to receive more information about the commitments undertaken by the government in the Common Regional Market as well as those related to the Green Agenda.





In terms of mechanisms for monitoring and oversight, 30% of the respondents indicated that the supervisory debates are the most appropriate mechanism, followed by supervisory visits (29%), committee hearings (26%), public hearings (17%), parliamentary questions (15%), and interpellation (15%).

What mechanisms you think are the most appropriate to use for monitoring and oversight?





Conclusion

The involvement of Members of Parliament (MPs) and the parliamentary staff in the Berlin Process is crucial in ensuring democratic oversight, transparency, and accountability in the implementation of the engagements of the Governments in this initiative. MPs play a vital role in representing the interests of their electors and in ensuring that the policies and decisions made in the framework of the Berlin Process are receipted by the citizens. The survey shows that the Parliaments are ready to be formally included in the Berlin Process and their willingness and capacities should be taken into consideration. The survey results show that on one side there is strong familiarity with the Process and the areas it covers and it is considered as relevant and successful initiative. Yet, on the other side the Parliaments are not satisfied with their role in the Process and have divided opinion whether the current capacities are sufficient to respond to formal engagement in the Process. The readiness of the Parliaments to be included in the Berlin Process must be canalized in the formal instruments, however that process should be followed with increasing of capacities and expertise of the Parliaments in the Berlin Process areas.

Key points

- Nearly all respondents (93%) are familiar with the Berlin Process, indicating good awareness among the MPs in the Western Balkans countries.
- However, while a majority understand the broader concept of regional cooperation, there is a notable lack of detailed knowledge about specific commitments within the Berlin Process.
- Despite doubts arising about the need for another regional initiative, a significant majority (69%) view the Berlin Process as successful.
- While most respondents see the relevance of the Parliaments in the Berlin Process (77%), they are largely not satisfied with their current role (64%), highlighting a need for formal recognition and increased involvement.
- Majority of the respondents (81%) believe the Parliaments should monitor the implementation of commitments, indicating an inclination toward greater oversight.
- Common Regional Market and the Green Agenda are identified as the most crucial topics for further information.

The publication is product of the project “Parliamentary Diplomacy: Regional Cooperation Through Enhanced Parliamentary Dialogue”. The project is going to be implemented by six project partners in each of the six Western Balkans countries. The lead partner is the Institute for Democracy (IDSCS) – North Macedonia. The other project partners are Institute Alternativa (IA) – Montenegro, Institute for Political Studies (ISP) – Albania, CRTA – Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability – Serbia, Kosova Democratic Institute (KDI)– Kosovo, and the Network of Progressive Initiatives (NPI) – Bosnia and Herzegovina.