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"My heart will beat for this region even when..."

Continuation of partnership policy is expected

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Without the influence and experience of Angela Merkel as the Head of Government of the EU's most populous country, the European Union faces new challenges.

The end of Chancellor Angela Merkel's term of office will have an impact on the foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany and the European Union. The Western Balkans region as a group of countries with strong ties to Germany and Merkel's Government is observing the formation of the new Federal Government with interest. The new Federal Government and the outcome of the 2023 presidential elections in France will have an impact on further accession talks and relations with the EU.

Angela Merkel, as German Chancellor, has strongly advocated the EU accession and integration of the Western Balkan countries, making it clear that the region is "European" and that it has a "European future", especially after Croatia's accession to the EU. "If one takes a look at things from a geostrategic perspective and takes a look at the map, one sees that a truly united Europe is possible only if the Western Balkan countries are also part of the EU",¹ Merkel said during her visit to Hungary 2019.

Given her background, Angela Merkel understands the challenges of transition processes faced by the Western Balkan countries very well and she has worked closely with Western Balkan governments.² Before she became Chancellor, Merkel served as Chair of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) since 2000, and before that period she was Minister for Women and Youth (1991-1994) and Minister for the Environment (1994-1998). In the 16 years of her term of office as Chancellor, the cooperation with the Western Balkan countries was a priority. Merkel worked, among other things, on finding a solution for the issues in the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo as well as the dispute between North Macedonia and Greece.

¹ German Chancellor. 2019. "Press Conference of German Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister of the Republic of Hungary, Viktor Orbán". Access on November 30, 2021. <https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-und-dem-ministerpraesidenten-der-republik-ungarn-viktor-orban-1661858>

² Schütz, Susanne. 2020. "Die Bedeutung des Westlichen Balkans in der deutschen EU-Ratspräsidentschaft". Access on May 04, 2021. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=893889>

Her involvement, interest and cooperation are particularly visible in case of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The country has been received special attention during her term of office. Today, Germany is the most important strategic partner of Bosnia and Herzegovina³. Alone in 2020, 13.47% of the all exports from Bosnia and Herzegovina went to Germany,⁴ and direct investments of Germany in Bosnia and Herzegovina amounted to more than 39 million EUR.⁵

Merkel's engagement and cooperation with the OHR

The strongest influence in politics is visible based on the current appointment of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina (OHR), Christian Schmidt, who was appointed with the direct support of Angela Merkel.⁶ Schmidt was a member of Chancellor Angela Merkel's Federal Government. Schmidt was nominated at a time when internal and external political actors criticise the position of the High Representative. Especially after the use of the "Bonn powers" by his predecessor, the Austrian diplomat Valentin Inzko, who had passed a law prohibiting denial of genocide and war crimes, which had been requested for a long time. In addition to Milorad Dodik, a member of the Presidency who opposes Schmidt's appointment as High Representative, China and Russia have called for the abolition of OHR as an institution.

"Chancellor Merkel assures that the Federal Government fully supports the exercise of the most important international function, the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina",⁷ an OHR statement from August 2021 said.

Christian Schmidt is not the first German national to be appointed High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina; former German Minister Christian Schwarz Schilling was appointed High Representative in 2006, just a few months after Merkel took office, and he held the position until mid-2007. "Christian Schmidt will be a very good High Representative who is well aware of the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina still has a long way to go towards democracy and the rule of law, and that the country needs the professional help of the international community to achieve this",⁸ Schwarz Schilling said in an interview for Bosnia's N1 TV channel.

³ Consulate General of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Munich. 2021. "Bilateral Relations". Access on September 01, 2021. <http://gkbih-muenchen.de/bilateralni-odnosi/>

⁴ Foreign Investment Promotion Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina. 2020. "Foreign trade statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina". Access on September 04, 2021.

http://fipa.gov.ba/informacije/statistike/izvoz_uvoz/default.aspx?id=211&langTag=hr-HR

⁵ Foreign Investment Promotion Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina. 2021. "FDI-Position und Performance". Accessed on September 03, 2021.

<http://www.fipa.gov.ba/informacije/statistike/investigije/default.aspx?id=180&langTag=en-US>

⁶ Cero, Harun. 2021. "Angela Merkel's political legacy in the Western Balkans will be tough to beat". Euronews. Access on September 01, 2021. <https://www.euronews.com/2021/05/17/angela-merkel-s-political-legacy-in-the-western-balkans-will-be-tough-to-beat-view>

⁷ OHR. 2021. "Chancellor Merkel ensures full support for High Representative Schmidt". Access on September 04, 2021. <http://www.ohr.int/chancellor-merkel-ensures-full-support-for-high-representative-schmidt/>

⁸ N1. 2021. "N1 Pressing: Christian Schwarz-Schilling (January 27, 2021.)". Access on November 30, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Up7ZKD5jdGI&t=1330s>

Support for important reforms

The engagement and support that Germany provides to Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkans has intensified since 2010 and the final phase of Croatia's EU accession. At that time, it was assumed that the Western Balkan countries would continue developing and would also join the EU in the future. Since then, many new changes have happened in the region: the visa regime liberalisation for Albania, Serbia and Montenegro as well as the ruling of the International Court of Justice on Kosovo's declaration of independence, which in many ways increased the need for international engagement in the region.

Following the 2010 elections, Angela Merkel particularly urged major parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina to form a government, since the process took too long. Furthermore, for Bosnia and Herzegovina it was crucial to resolve the Sejdić-Finci case after the European Court of Human Rights had ruled a year earlier that ethnic minorities or "others" were discriminated against under the Constitution, the law and especially the Electoral Law. However, although the EU and Germany in particular exercised strong pressure and influence, this issue has still not been resolved.

German-British initiative – a successful impulse

The year 2014 was a turbulent one for Bosnia and Herzegovina. The year started with mass protests and riots due to an economic and social crisis in the country. In many cases, such protests turned violent. In addition to this, Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with Serbia and Croatia, faced the worst natural disaster in recent decades. The water flooded cities and caused enormous damages for the economy, and especially for agriculture and trade.

Against such a background, EU Member States, Germany and the United Kingdom, called for the necessary reforms to be implemented by the country in order to receive EU funds. The "German-British initiative" included a Stabilisation and Association Agreement that was supposed to support and strongly influence the country on its path towards the EU. In addition to strong support from Angela Merkel and the Prime Minister David Cameron, this initiative was also supported by the EU. "This might be a turning point on Bosnia and Herzegovina's path towards the EU",⁹ said Federica Mogherini, former High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission during a press conference in 2014. The EU therefore requested substantial changes in the field of economy, transparency and legal reforms in exchange for EU funds.

Berlin process for a European future of the Western Balkans

One of the most important initiatives of Angela Merkel's Government, with strong support from other EU partners, is the Berlin process, which aims to strengthen regional cooperation in the Western Balkan countries and focus on concrete projects and reforms that will ensure

⁹ Delegation of the European Union & European Union Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina. 2014. "Remarks by HR/VP Federica Mogherini on Bosnia and Herzegovina following the Foreign Affairs Council on December 15, 2014". Access on November 29, 2021. <https://europa.ba/?p=17270>

a faster accession of the region in the EU.¹⁰ It was initiated in 2014 during a Western Balkans Conference in Berlin. The Berlin process is considered the most successful initiative of the EU dedicated to the Western Balkans and one of the most important diplomatic projects initiated by Angela Merkel and her cabinet during her third term of office.¹¹ The "German-British initiative" has resulted in reforms and projects in the Western Balkans and is part of the Berlin process.

In addition to this, many significant projects were initiated in the Western Balkans as part of the Berlin process, including the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), the Western Balkans Chambers Investment Forum (WBCIF), the Western Balkans Fund (WBF) and other economic, infrastructure and youth projects in the region.

Continuous participation and cooperation

Germany sees the Western Balkan countries as important partners and as part of the European family. Numerous statements, cooperation and initiatives of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel confirm this. When it comes to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Merkel last visited the country in 2015. The Chancellor did not visit the country after the election of the current Presidency members in 2018.

In the summer of 2018, the Chancellor intervened directly in a political debate on the future of the Western Balkans. In spite of the support of the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, and the then President of Kosovo, Hashim Thaçi, as well as the support of politicians from the EU, Angela Merkel strongly rejected the idea of redrawing the borders between Kosovo and Serbia along ethnic lines. She was of the opinion that it endangered other Western Balkan countries, peace and the idea of a multi-ethnic state in the very fragmented region. "The territorial integrity of the Western Balkan countries has been established and is inviolable. This has to be repeated again and again, because there are always attempts to potentially discuss borders, and we can't do that",¹² said Angela Merkel in 2018 during a meeting in Berlin with the former Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Denis Zvizdić.

Last year as Chancellor: Covid-19, climate change and the Western Balkans

The German Bundestag has elected Chancellor Olaf Scholz as Angela Merkel's successor. During her last term of office, Chancellor Angela Merkel worked on key issues: the necessary

¹⁰ Möpert, Fabian. 2015. "Die deutsch-britische Reforminitiative für Bosnien und Herzegowina: Neubeginn oder Absenkung der Konditionalitätsstandards für die EU-Mitgliedschaft?" Association "Pravnik". Access on September 05, 2021. <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=726067>

¹¹ Anastasakis, Othon; Bennett, Adam; Sanfey, Peter. 2018. "The Western Balkans and the Berlin Process". South East European Studies at Oxford. Access on September 08, 2021. https://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/berlin_process_workshop_report_v2.pdf

¹² Gray, Andrew. 2018. "Angela Merkel: No Balkan border changes". Politico. Access on September 03, 2021. <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-no-balkan-border-changes-kosovo-serbia-vucic-thaci/>

steps regarding climate change. In addition to this, Covid-19 has had a significant impact on her last term of office. The election of the US President Joe Biden provided an opportunity to re-establish closer transatlantic relations.

The close relations with the Western Balkans also became apparent during the last months of the Chancellor's term of office. After the Western Balkans Summit that gathered heads of state of countries participating in the Berlin process in July 2021, Merkel commented on some achievements and further challenges in the region over the past period. Merkel explained that it was in the interest of the EU to make peace and cooperation in the Western Balkans possible, since "there are many reasons, including geostrategic ones, why that region is part of Europe and why we want it to become a member of the EU".¹³ She also mentioned that several successful projects were implemented over the past 12 months, including the abolition of roaming in the region on July 1, 2021. Merkel also mentioned the positive influence in the economy and education, the introduction of "green lanes" at the borders, exchange of students and projects organised by regional organisations such as RYCO.

In spite of these steps, there are still numerous challenges; the greatest challenges are the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia and the dispute between North Macedonia and Bulgaria.

The situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is also being referred to as unsatisfactory, and Merkel explained that Christian Schmidt would help the country resolve internal disagreements in order to strengthen institutions, speed up the EU accession process and at the same time implement new reforms, such as the necessary new Electoral Law. Several months before the summit, in April 2021, Angela Merkel discussed the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina in a phone conversation with the Russian President Vladimir Putin. High Representative, Christian Schmidt, received an invitation from the Chancellor to attend a meeting in Berlin in August 2021 in order to intensively discuss the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and future objectives of the new High Representative. Merkel expressed once again her full support for the appointment of Schmidt, which also indicates that he can use the advice and influence even after the end of her term of office as Chancellor.

During a press conference in July 2021, Merkel also stated that closer cooperation is needed in the Western Balkans, citing the possibility of the establishment of a common regional market as a positive initiative. Merkel also said that Germany would send at least 3 million anti-Covid-19 vaccines to the Western Balkans through the Covax system. She then also repeated that she understood that the process of EU integration was too slow for some Western Balkan countries, but that she hoped that the process could be accelerated and she recalled that the legacy of the Berlin process would continue to influence the accession process.¹⁴

Last visits of the Chancellor to the Western Balkans

¹³ German Chancellor. 2021. "Press conference by Chancellor Merkel after the 8th Western Balkans Summit as part of the Berlin process". Access on December 06, 2021. <https://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenz-von-bundestkanzlerin-merkel-nach-dem-achten-westbalkangipfel-im-rahmen-des-berliner-prozesses-1939784>

¹⁴ Welt news network. 2021. "Strategische Aufgabe: Statement von Kanzlerin Merkel zur Beziehung zum Westbalkan". Access on September 01, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hf7hxTjLjQI>

While Federal elections and their consequences dominated in domestic politics in Germany in September and October, a major focus of Angela Merkel's work was the situation and EU accession of Western Balkan countries. In September this year, Merkel decided to visit the capitals of Serbia and Albania, Belgrade and Tirana. During the meeting with the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama, and the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, as well as with other heads of states from the Western Balkans, Angela Merkel discussed the situation in the Western Balkans.

"As I already told you, the interests of this region will remain a priority of every new German Chancellor, if for no other reason, then simply because we have so many people from Western Balkan countries who live and work in Germany and who are part of our prosperity",¹⁵ Merkel said during a press conference following the meeting with Rama in Tirana.

In addition to meeting Vučić and Rama, Merkel also met the heads of states of other Western Balkan countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo. Some of the most important topics they discussed were certainly the talks about the common regional market that is supposed to become the largest cooperation project between the Western Balkan countries so far.

In addition to this, they also discussed the details of the "Open Balkans" initiative, an important initiative supported by Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia.

The EU Summit in Slovenia

The summit took place on October 6 in Slovenia and included many discussions on EU accession and other topics between the Western Balkan countries and the EU. Heads of states and representatives of the EU stated that they strongly support the European path of these countries and that the EU would provide assistance to the region during this period, especially in the field of green and digital transition, regional cooperation, vaccination and response to challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the most important aspects agreed during the summit is the new 9 billion EUR economic and investment plan for all six Western Balkan countries.

Countries such as Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo* were interested in further discussion on accession talks, but EU leaders were reluctant when it came to this issue. "So far, no accession could happen, since no country met the conditions. I do not really believe in setting dates, but I do believe in keeping our promises",¹⁶ Angela Merkel said during her speech at the Western Balkans Summit in 2021.

¹⁵ German Chancellor. 2021. "Press conference by Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister Rama on the Chancellor's visit to the Republic of Albania". Access on November 30, 2021. <https://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenz-von-bundestkanzlerin-merkel-und-ministerpraesident-rama-zum-besuch-der-bundestkanzlerin-in-der-republik-albanien-am-14-september-2021-1960102>

¹⁶ German Chancellor. 2021. "Press conference by Chancellor Merkel on the EU-Western Balkans Summit on October 06, 2021", Access on December 06, 2021. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenz-von-bundestkanzlerin-merkel-zum-eu-westbalkan-gipfeltreffel-am-6-oktober-2021-1965796>

"This is not about us doing favours to the Western Balkan countries. I am firmly convinced that this is in the core interest of the EU for the purpose of our security, peace and prosperity",¹⁷ said Merkel during a press conference on October 06, 2021 and added that the Berlin process also played an important role for the whole region, but also for the EU accession of these countries.

The new Chancellor: change of course or status quo?

After 16 years in office as German Chancellor, Angela Merkel is the longest-serving head of government in Europe. She has greatly influenced the global and European politics and some of the key events of the 21st century happened during her term of office, such as the Arab Spring and the war in Syria, the 2015 refugee crisis, Covid-19 and many other global and regional events. Merkel has managed to maintain stability and trust in politics.

"My heart will beat for this region even when I leave the political office I hold now",¹⁸ Merkel said during a press conference following the meeting with Rama in Tirana.

Although there might be some minor differences in the approach of the new German Chancellor in Berlin to the Western Balkans and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the strong basis that Angela Merkel created during her four terms of office as chancellor constitute the foundations of her successor's policy. The influence of the EU, the Federal Republic of Germany, the work of the High Representative, the influence of the Berlin process, RYCO, the German-British initiative and numerous projects and initiatives will continue to be relevant factors that will ensure progress in cooperation and EU accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina and other Western Balkan countries.

¹⁷ German Chancellor. 2021. "Press conference by Chancellor Merkel on the EU-Western Balkans Summit on October 06, 2021", Access on December 06, 2021. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenz-von-bundeschkanzlerin-merkel-zum-eu-westbalkan-gipfeltreffel-am-6-oktober-2021-1965796>

¹⁸ German Chancellor. 2021. "Press conference by Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister Rama on the Chancellor's visit to the Republic of Albania". Access on November 30, 2021. <https://www.bundeschkanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenz-von-bundeschkanzlerin-merkel-und-ministerpraesident-rama-zum-besuch-der-bundeschkanzlerin-in-der-republik-albanien-am-14-september-2021-1960102>

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