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For Immediate Release

Amplifying the Voice of Civil Society: The 2024 Civil Society and Think Tank Forum Presents Recommendations to Presidents and Prime Ministers at the Berlin Process 10th Anniversary Summit

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From left to right: Dr. Christian Hagemann, Olivera Nikolic, Tania Ivanova, Nihad Harbaš, Sofija Todorović, Klejn Ngraçani, Sokol Zeneli, Dr. Stormy-Annika Mildner, and Dr. Zoran Nechev.

Today, on the 10th anniversary **Berlin Process Summit**, representatives of the Civil Society and Think Tank Forum presented policy recommendations to leaders from the Western Balkans, the European Union, and the United Kingdom.

This handover follows the **Civil Society and Think Tank Forum 2024**, which took place on October 9-11. The conference featured an opening by **Minister of State for Europe and Climate Dr. Anna Lührmann** as well as active participation from **Special Representative Manuel Sarrazin and Ambassador René Troccaz** as well as input from six Western Balkan ministers or ministers of state. At the heart of the conference stood a workshop on “Enabling Spaces for Civil Society” and other high-level exchanges

between key decision-makers and civil society. The civil society and think tank representatives also presented a mapping study on “10 Years of the Berlin Process.”



Clockwise from top left: Chancellor Olaf Scholz reviews recommendations with Zoran Nechev, Tania Ivanova, and Sokol Zeneli of the Civil Society & Think Tank Forum; Commission President Ursula von der Leyen discusses with representatives of the Civil Society Forum; Chancellor Olaf Scholz discusses with Sofija Todorović of the Civil Society & Think Tank Forum; members of the Civil Society & Think Tank Forum and the Youth Forum pose for a photo.

An official side forum of the Berlin Process, the Civil Society and Think Tank Forum 2024 (CSF) brought together civil society stakeholders representing over 115 organizations to actively shape and participate in the Berlin Process. This one-year process is designed to strengthen civil society visibility and equip decision-makers with new insights through public exchanges on concrete policy recommendations. As co-organizers of the CSF, the Southeast Europe Association and the Aspen Institute Germany noted important impacts of the forum, including high-level exchanges between civil society, governments from the Western Balkans and the EU, and other key stakeholders.

“The region’s civil society contributes to the Berlin Process by shedding light on a vast array of different issues areas”, explains **Dr. Christian Hagemann, the Executive Director of the Southeast Europe Association.** “It thereby helps to keep many issues of relevance for the region on the agenda, even if they will not have concrete deliverables in a given year.”

“The Civil Society Forum’s approach is unique and particularly effective because it is rooted in local actors’ expertise and experience,” says **Dr. Stormy-Annika Mildner, the Executive Director of the Aspen Institute Germany**. “This is more important than ever, given the region’s importance to the EU in terms of security, stability, trade, and transit routes as well as the ongoing EU accession talks.”



Participants gather for a family photo at the Civil Society and Think Tank Forum on October 9-11, 2024.

This year, the CSF has formed seven thematic working groups to develop recommendations with representatives of over 115 civil society organizations. The thematic areas addressed by the civil society leaders included: EU Integration and the Berlin Process; Dealing with the Past and Reconciliation; Gender and Diversity; Common Regional Market and Mobility; Energy, Climate Change, and Decarbonization; Environmental Protection and Sustainable Economic Development; and Disinformation and Cyber Threats. In addition, crosscutting issues were covered in all groups: rule of law, youth, minorities, and local issues. For the first time, the Civil Society and Think Tank Forum featured a working group focused on gender and diversity, including grassroots organizations from across the Western Balkans and the EU.

CSF recommendations chart a path forward to address the most pressing challenges and opportunities facing the Western Balkans. The recommendations are specific, timely, and addressed towards specific stakeholders, including governments in the Western Balkans, European Union, and United Kingdom as well as regional organizations and civil society. Divided between “Low Hanging Fruit” and “Tougher Nuts to Crack,” the recommendations offer immediate steps and longer-term solutions from the perspective of civil society. If acted upon, the recommendations could meaningfully advance regional cooperation and European integration. Participants also presented

recommendations on how the future of the Berlin Process should better reflect their priorities and put forward their own ideas for possible changes to the Process. The recommendations can be accessed here: <https://wb-csf.eu/publications-csf/policy-recommendations-civil-society-think-tank-forum-2024>

On the Berlin Process 10th anniversary, the CSF commissioned a comprehensive study to identify and map outputs and initiatives within the Berlin Process. The study provides—for the first time—a complete, unified and clearcut picture to policy makers and other stakeholders. Authors Dr. Marika Djolai and Dr. Silvana Mojsovska presented the study at the CSF on a panel which included several esteemed speakers. The study can be accessed here: <https://wb-csf.eu/publications-csf/stocktaking-study-10-years-of-the-berlin-process>



ADDITIONAL PHOTOS CAN BE FOUND HERE:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/lt569b297o8y4yjs29oqm/ANMI-Xms81m-9r7scyISSbg?rlkey=opl432qmwpcuatjs8u76x08d&st=d41tlbe2&dl=0>

Quotations from civil society leaders participating in the Berlin Process Summit:

“This year, the Berlin Process has marked a significant success with the unblocking of the CEFTA agreements, the publication of the new CRM Action Plan, and the establishment of the fifth mobility agreement. These milestones have reinforced the Berlin Process's reputation as a vital complement to the EU accession process, as Western Balkan countries actively pursue closer ties to the EU single market. Moreover, the Berlin Process has served as an effective platform for introducing innovative ideas aimed at streamlining the EU decision-making process, including the proposal to implement Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) during intermediate stages of EU negotiations. This approach underscores the commitment to making the integration process more efficient and responsive to the needs of the region,” said **Dr. Zoran Nechev**, Head of the Center for EU integration and Senior Research at the Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis – Skopje and Rapporteur for the Civil Society and Think Tank Forum 2024.

“The variety of issues raised within the “Dealing with the Past and Reconciliation” group made it hard for us to decide on the content for the recommendations. The working group members agreed on the importance of highlighting that full democratic potential of societies in the WB6 cannot be reached without effective and politically backed-up process of dealing with past. Also, the necessity to find institutional ways to address the problems of marginalised victims' groups has been pointed out, while not giving up on finding new ways to include Croatia in all DwP debates,” said **Sofija Todorović**, Director of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights Serbia and Rapporteur for the Civil Society and Think Tank Forum 2024.

“Empowering diverse voices isn't just a commitment—it's a fundamental value and the key to unlocking sustainable progress across borders and transforming our societies into stronger participatory democracies. Equal voices mean equal choices! Gender equality

and intersectionality, understood in the broadest and most inclusive sense, should lie at the core of all policies and initiatives, including the Berlin Process,” said **Tania Ivanova**, Director of Reactor – Research in Action and Rapporteur for the Civil Society and Think Tank Forum 2024.

“The Berlin Process partner countries should address the absence of the rule of law in environment-related decision-making processes and policy creation with the WB6 governments. The absence of the rule of law is a core issue with a significant negative impact on nature and environmental protection. The institutions and authorities that are responsible for the implementation of laws often ignore and/or even breach legal provisions, followed by a similar approach by the national courts,” said **Klejn Ngraçani**, Project Manager at PPNEA and Rapporteur for the Civil Society and Think Tank Forum 2024.

"The current geopolitical uncertainty has significantly increased disinformation threats and cyberattack risks in the vulnerable Western Balkans region. This situation calls for engagement and close cooperation between governments, regulators, civil society, academics, and media, both nationally and regionally, to ensure citizens' right to be informed, online safety, and protection. Close cooperation with Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) is crucial in reducing the malign effects of disinformation campaigns, and EU assistance in this process is essential," said **Olivera Nikolic**, Director of the Montenegro Media Institute and Rapporteur for the Civil Society and Think Tank Forum 2024.

About the Civil Society and Think Tank Forum: Since the second summit of the Berlin Process in Austria in 2015, the Civil Society and Think Tank Forum has provided a unique platform for dialogue between civil society and government representatives. By convening stakeholders on the sidelines of the Berlin Process, the Civil Society and Think Tank Forum allows Western Balkan civil society to contribute their ideas to advance cooperation and integration in the Western Balkans. The Southeast Europe Association and the Aspen Institute Germany extend their gratitude to the German Federal Foreign Office for their generous support.

About the Southeast Europe Association: the Southeast Europe Association is an independent, non-profit organization based in Munich. The Association is dedicated to the promotion of academic, political, economic and cultural relations with the countries of Southeast Europe and seeks to offer in-depth knowledge on historical and contemporary developments in this region. Through our events, publications and the expert knowledge of our members, we offer a forum for independent and non-partisan dialogue between the Federal Republic of Germany and the countries of Southeast Europe, as well as for policy consulting and for policy debates. <https://www.sogde.org>

About the Aspen Institute Germany: the Aspen Institute Germany is an international nonpartisan and non-profit organization dedicated to fostering open dialogue on contemporary issues. Through regular events and international exchanges, the Institute also brings together decision-makers, experts and members of the public to exchange

and debate on a variety of questions, such as transatlantic cooperation, European integration, or cybersecurity and disinformation. <https://www.aspeninstitute.de>

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