

GLOBAL AND REGIONAL ORDER

# EUROPE IS IN THE AIR

A Factual Fiction Essay On The Berlin Process  
And The Power Of Franco-German Relations

Bujar Luma  
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# FOREWORD

Some things are better told as stories. In a confusing year with global challenges overshadowing daily national and regional politics, it did not seem right to just provide another article on the state of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans. The Berlin-Process took place but in challenging times, hosted by two neighboring countries, Bulgaria and North Macedonia, who were not on the best of terms. Especially when the European path seems clearly paved in the Balkans, we have sadly become used to last minute surprises, political twists and issues from the past to resurface very quickly.

Therefore, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Skopje Office has decided to use the unusual year for unusual perspectives. In order to do so, we decided to return to a core principle that not only guides our work as a political foundation, but that has shaped Europe and that strongly impacts the Western Balkans every

day: The Franco-German Friendship. It essentially represents the idea that even the greatest obstacles from the past can be overcome in the spirit of peace and cooperation. If we are smart, we will learn from history so that it does not divide us, but that it unites us for the common goals. We asked a close partner of ours, Bujar Luma, founder of LOJA Center for Balkan Cooperation, who has been involved in regional cooperation for many years and who has experienced the surprises, curiosities and frustrations of working on regional cooperation in the Balkans, to speak and think freely.

The following text is a factual fiction essay about things that have happened, may happen, or may not happen. The outcome of the story is in the air.

*Eva Ellereit*  
*Director of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Skopje Office*



## 1

## EUROPE IS IN THE AIR

It was the summer 2024, June 2024.

One more day and the summit would begin which would be the last of the Berlin Process Summits for the Western Balkans.

When finished, this would be that last stone in the European journey of the Balkan region. With this summit, Germany and France were concluding a very complex process and were clearly leaving their mark on lasting peace in the Balkans. As a result, few years from now, the full membership of the Balkans in the EU would begin. Europe would be complete. So, on itself, this was more than just an ordinary summit. If successfully completed, it would not only meet, but exceed the expectations of the very creators of the Berlin Process.

The Berlin Process, from 2014 until now, had helped to overcome some very complex issues in the Balkan region. Not only had it directed many political issues towards a solution in line with the European framework, but as a mechanism in times of blockage and stagnation of the integration process, the Berlin Process kept the idea of Europe in the Balkans alive!

Let us recapitulate: in the South of the western Balkans, North Macedonia had been encouraged not only to find internal cohesion, but also to resolve the name dispute with Greece and overcome the historic dispute with Bulgaria as well, by being provided a multi-perspective approach to the past without blocking the future. The issue of the autocephaly by the Macedonian church from the Serbian was still acute, but as it was not obstructing the future it was dealt with no hurry.

In Montenegro, the accession dynamic not only managed to secure consensus so that Montenegro could be consistent in its Euro-Atlantic journey and foreign policy, and, to resolve the problem of religion, but it also helped to demarcate the border with Kosovo.

Albania and Greece had already resolved the issue of the maritime border; they abolished the law of war and had agreed that the issue of property of persons

deported after the war should be addressed through international courts.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, although strong internal debates and clashes continued, nevertheless guarantees were provided in order to not contest the territorial integrity of the country; furthermore, visible toward EU and NATO membership had been taken.

In June 2024, for the last summit of the Berlin Process, they had left one issue, which was probably the most important in the Balkans - the full normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia.

Many international factors contributed to all these developments, especially Germany and France within the mechanisms offered by the Berlin Process. Although the history stubbornly spoke that often at crucial moments the help from overseas was necessary, nevertheless these two countries were taking on an even greater role.

To achieve this, Germany and France had been acting separately from time to time and were finally joining efforts together. Germany, in addition to the official policies, was also visible through organizations, platforms, funds and institutions such as Goethe Institut, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Der Zivile Friedensdienst, KURVE Wustrow and many others. On the other side France, besides the official policy, also helped through its state agency for development, the Institute Français, André Malraux Centre, Service Civic, etc.

Meanwhile, they both had been part of military interventions and peacekeeping missions. but a crucial starting point for the credibility of the efforts and the long-lasting impact of the collaboration between countries had always been the French German Youth Office (DFJW-OFAJ).

At the same time, Germany and France, taking as an example the vision and values that Charles De

Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer promoted with the Élysée Treaty, and working for deploying these same values at the southern borders of the continent, were in a way fulfilling and implementing their vision of Europe. This idea and model of the Franco-German reconciliation for the Balkans had also been offered by President Jacques Chirac and Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder. It had been officially offered immediately after the Kosovo war through the DFJW-OFAJ, and now it was being offered through the Berlin Process. For example, based on this narrative, they had also helped establish the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, officialized in 2016 in Paris.

With all these efforts, compiled together, Germany and France were drawing parallels between the Élysée Treaty and the Berlin Process. Here the German Chancellor and the French president, not only were building on the legacy of De Gaulle and Adenauer, but they were also further pushing the dream of Alfred Grosser and Robert Schumann.

In its essence, this idea was even deeper and of a much earlier date. It corresponded with the values that emerged from the French Revolution. However, they were only brought to life when France and Germany stretched their hands for reconciliation in Élysée.

Even in the Balkans, the idea of Europe was quite old and present to all nations. Unfortunately, it often suffered severe blows from the East and eastern extensions (often its inhabitants), and as a result the European idea in the Balkans was oppressed and marginalized. The bearers of this idea not only felt very often forgotten and betrayed by Europe, but also in most cases paid a very high price for their determination. However, to be fair, beside real Europeans, there were constantly groups and individuals, both from the South and the North of the Alps, who saw the idea of Europe through the lenses of purely personal interest. This was a depressing and discouraging fact for all those who pledged and defended European values in this part of Europe.

Nevertheless, surprisingly this idea never faded - when others thought that it had faded away, it reappeared, and it grew again and again. As if it was an integral part, a code of the subconscious!

Now it was cultivated by the Berlin Process. It is around this narrative that Germany and France gathered momentum in the context of the summits for the Balkans and, in particular during this last summit of June 2024!

No one knows why, but the Chancellor and the President, whilst checking the last details of the summit, silently remembered something; whenever Eu-

rope was at risk from abroad or from its own inhabitants, someone protected it from overseas. They even asked themselves: Why so? Would Europe need to be protected from overseas again?

In the meantime, details were set for this summit and all arrangements were made. This summit had arisen the curiosity of the media like none of the previous ones. Not only the interest of the media from our continent, but also of many American, Russian, Turkish, Chinese and other media agencies...

The fact that this time the host was neither an EU country, nor would it happen in the format "an EU country + a candidate country", was something new. This time the hosts were Serbia and Kosovo, two countries claiming membership, and despite centuries of hostility had pledged to reconcile. In order to prove this, they were organizing the summit.

It was both an opportunity and a risk. Therefore, this summit was directly sponsored and monitored by the French President and the Chancellor of Germany. Eventually the EU itself was aiding, as it was the European spirit itself that also needed this to be a success.

It was something very rare to see such an increased activity and presence not only of the media but also of many other agencies from eastern countries.

The leaders' meeting would start in Belgrade, while the other component of the summit had started in Pristina - the Civil Society Forum and the Business Forum!

As agreed, the Forum would make recommendations to political leaders on European policies in the region. The Forum expected from this summit that the region would be certified as part of Europe and would behave as such.

For decades and until the present day, this was the expectation of people who fought for the Europeanization of the Balkans.

And, it would happen the next day!

Was this not a confirmation of that call for which Skanderbeg and Pjeter Bogdani had fought? Did not the Frasheri brothers, De Rada, Ndre Mjeda and the Qiriazzi sisters totally pour their souls and knowledge to this cause? Was this not the cry of the students of Prishtina repressed in 1981? Did not the late President of Kosovo Ibrahim Rugova repeat it in each one of his weekend conferences? Didn't Ismail Kadare pour all the imagination of a writer for this purpose?

Didn't Milan Obrenovic, Aleksandar Obrenovic, Dimitrje Tucovic, Zoran Djindjic and Ivan Stambolic (the



last four killed) aspire and pay a price for it? Did not, Marko Nikezic and Latinka Perovic in a very risky times raise their voices for it? Didn't Borka Pavicevic work with all her friends from all over the Balkans until her last breath?

Was it not the embodiment of the manifesto of the Republic of Krushevo, did not Pitu Guli and Nikola Karev fought for it? Didn't Arben Xhaferi reminded us of this until the day he closed his eyes in solitude? Did not Zoran Zaev and some other MP's almost pay with their life on that dark April? Did not the exaltation of November 2020 prove it, when for the first time the national football team of North Macedonia qualified for the European championship?

Was it not what they wanted in early Duklje? Didn't the Balshajt - Balsci wanted this? Wasn't Slavko Perovic's voice a reminder when the Balkan sky was covered with darkness? Isn't Andrej Nikolaidis reminding us about it whenever he can?

Didn't Captain Hussein Gradashovic fight for it? In the darkest days of the siege of Sarajevo, did not the SARTR (Sarajevo War Theater) keep this spirit alive?

And many other people, south and north of the Alps, who day by day, with full devotion and often in silence, embody this cause, who will forgive me for not being able to mention them by name..

Tomorrow, when completed, wouldn't the bones of Milaim, who has lived in the same house for 96 years and changed nationality for 9 times, find peace at the edge of Sharr Mountain. The states and borders came and went, and Milaim in that same house, kept Europe in himself and for generations to come, as much as he could!

There was something Hegelian in all this, while everything seemed to be reaching the end where it had begun, in Kosovo. From the Battle of Kosovo in that remote month of June until the Merciful Angel in another June, centuries later, this land had only seen wars. Sometimes it was being defended against the East and sometimes against its own inhabitants. Often those who loved this territory, not necessarily loved the population living there.

So, for many reasons, this was the summit for which Germany and France had invested the most. This was more than a moment; it was a momentum. One of those divine hours about which Stefan Zweig had written like no one else! Together they would write the European history for which this region had paid an extremely high price.

It had paid such a price especially when France and Germany were taking up arms against each other, when they did not share a view and attitude for Eu-

rope and consequently neither for the region; it had paid such a price at the Versailles conference and the Congress of Berlin. The first time France and Germany were together, things seem to be clearing up, like in Rambouillet for example! Even more so with the Berlin Process.

Therefore, these two countries had agreed to approach the region with the power of their own example, that of a reconciliation which essentially entailed confrontation with the past and brought freedom, justice and equality.

Coincidentally or not, one before the summit, on June 10, 2024, the French President and the German Chancellor met at the memorial village of Oradour-sur-Glane in France! In the Balkans, someone read this visit as a message before the summit. In reality, with this, France and Germany were commemorating this infamous event in its 80th anniversary and were recalling that peace is cherished and how important the reconciliation between these two nations has been for Europe

Were these not the values that emerged from the French Revolution?

Thus, with the power of reconciliation, with the spirit of Élysée Treaty in the framework of the summits of the Berlin Process, the Balkan states and nations were helped in finding their European path.

And here the moment was coming, the historic, the divine hour was knocking!

From Skopje, Prishtina, Sarajevo, Tirana and Podgorica, the prime ministers' planes were ready to take off for Belgrade. Meanwhile, the President of France and the Chancellor of Germany had left Paris and Berlin respectively.

All the prime ministers of the Balkans were already in the air and watching from above. They were looking down with some difficulty as they were hindered by the pollution-smog that was common to the Balkans. It knew no borders. Even when they could see, they often saw a ruined nature, deforested mountains, some dams that obstructed the flow of rivers and quite often an urban chaos. Religious objects were also seen, mostly on the tops and around the streets. As if they had been added!

This was also the impression that the French President and the German Chancellor had, as they got closer to the Balkans. Somehow, it was blurrier and harder to see down there!

The plane in which the Prime Minister of Kosovo was flying was operated by Euro-Wings (as agreed

between the two governments in Washington). The Prime Minister was sitting by the window. He was reading the joint letter that the President of France and the Chancellor of Germany had sent to the political leaders of the region this morning, but from time to time, he looked out the window. At some point, it was very difficult to see anything because of the smog produced by the Kosova-A lignite power plant. Even the little that he saw was not what he would have liked to see. Urban chaos again, a lot of fertile land left barren, and on those lands, he saw residential neighborhoods probably of new rich. A strange mix, he said to himself. He saw too many car cemeteries, though! He did not notice any significant factory, which frustrated him particularly! Except for Sharr Mountains, only the winding highway that connected Durrës with Prishtina, Merdare and Nis was clearly visible (done because of strong insistence from the overseas). The plane was following that same course. As the Prime Minister looked at the Kosovo plain, he was reminded that the battle of Kosovo had also been a war of all the Balkan nations for a European region. Despite the distortions that daily politics had made to the history of this battle, he, as a good connoisseur, knew this quite well and he assumed that also the professional historians did.

Before leaving the airspace of Kosovo behind, the plane made a turn, he saw the American base Bondsteel, and only a minute later, just before entering the space of Serbia, he clearly distinguished the Russian base in front.

As he looked down, he did not understand why, he remembered that a former head of a regional structure emerging from the Berlin Process had served as a soldier during the war near that base. Perhaps he remembered that according to the agenda he would meet him at the summit now as part of the Serbian government. As the plane flew over the city of Pozarevac, he remembered that there was a memorial for Milosevic, as it was also his birthplace.

Suddenly, uneasy. It was something personal: he noticed the prison where he had been kept locked up and abused for two years. He was reminded that it had been in June, June 10th to be precise, when they had thrown him into that prison. He said to himself, "Is it possible that one of those who used violence against me will be in charge of my safety in Belgrade?" However, he had already taken on the obligations and had to leave these thoughts behind himself. Besides the vision, his reason was being blurred as well.

Was this June 10 a mere coincidence? This month of June seemed to be reserved for the moments when history is written, he kept saying to himself. And, somehow, he broke away by counting the historical dates of June with himself!

At that moment, he remembered that with a similar plane, but with the destination The Hague, four years ago, the former President of Kosovo, the former Prime Minister and the former Speaker of Parliament had flown together. He said to himself, "What if this plane goes even further? What if it lands in The Hague?"

He remembered that here in the air he controlled nothing but his own thoughts.

As they approached Belgrade and began their descent, signs of foreign investment were becoming visible below. He saw some signs of well-known German brands and occasionally a French brand. He also saw buildings of Russian, Turkish and Chinese companies.

Suddenly, the phone rang. Someone informed him that the President of Serbia had already changed his mind: he would not accept placing a memorial plaque to honor the bodies of Kosovo Albanians that were buried in Batajnica. He had refused, as protests had begun in Belgrade. At most, he offered to do something in the form of a somewhat confusing statement in the context of the summit conclusions.

The Prime Minister of Kosovo immediately decided not to land. He said that if there is no memorial plaque, he would return to Prishtina. Both the German Chancellor and the French President learned about this decision while in the air. At that moment, everyone was being tested, particularly the President of France and the Chancellor of Germany.

North of the Alps, often one could not understand how you can agree in the process and not respect the conclusions.

Someone from the air had reported about all this overseas, while from the ground there were some communication lines from beyond the Carpathians.

Now not only the credibility of Germany and France was being tested, but above all else, centuries-old investment for Europe, Europe itself!

Below, there were also former heads of governments who had worked so hard for Europe and who wanted to celebrate this last summit as a success. There was also the whole group of civil society that was looking forward to this moment! Everyone was trying to do something on their own. Trying to contact regional structures, individuals, a whole army of people trained with European funds? Could they do something? They were looking for someone who could help in this situation, someone who could talk to the Prime Minister and the President. Could it be the one who had foreseen this scenario a few years ago

and who believed that the idea for this last summit was also inspired by one of his writings?

Would the Chancellor of Germany and the President of France speak with one voice? Was there again the necessity of an intervention from the overseas?

Was that divine knocking right now? Did the French President and the German Chancellor read it that way? Did the President of Serbia and the Prime Minister of Kosovo read it that way?

The situation required quick and tough decisions. In order to speak unanimously, what would Germany and France use as their strongest argument? Was the example of reconciliation the most powerful weapon?

In front of them the divine hour was knocking even harder! They had the opportunity to write an important chapter of history. A rare opportunity for Germany and France to display through their own example leadership and hold the reins over the old continent.

A fog was starting to appear down in Belgrade. The crowd that was first noticed was now almost covered by fog.

From another plane also came the announcement that it would refuse to land, while a third one was hesitating. Meanwhile the other planes were waiting for signals and instructions.

Belgrade was now losing clarity, while the fog was getting thicker!

These flying objects up in the air, were neither the black ravens from that remote June nor the iron birds of a much later June. They were the flying machines of June 2024 that did not have much time to make history!

While, after many centuries, these were a little more than 20 years that this region was living in peace and democracy together! Never before had the region experienced anything similar.

The Euro-Wings were spinning in the air and had fuel for no more than 20 minutes of spin. Then, they either they had to start landing or take the return route.

## The author:

**Bujar Luma**, a theatre director by vocation, integrates into his work of civic activism modern techniques from the art and new media to effectively engage an intercultural dialogue between communities. He is the founder of LOJA - Centre for Balkan Cooperation, established in 1999 in response to the ethnic conflict in ex-Yugoslavia. Initiatives launched by Bujar and LOJA in ethnically charged environments went on to become models for replication in North Macedonia and the wider Balkan region. From 2000, Bujar closely cooperated with DFJW-OFAJ, the German - CPS program and the US-based MyHeroProject, to build a network and to develop activities in Balkans. In 2014 Bujar became a member of the Joint Coordination Team, a core group of facilitators responsible for the process of the establishment of the Regional Cooperation Youth Office (RYCO), one of important outcomes of the Berlin process. He has been key speaker at many conferences and has been involved in „Track II diplomacy“ initiatives, especially in the Western Balkans. Beside civil society activism Bujar works as a freelancer in professional theaters.

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