EU-Western Balkans Summit

Tirana Declaration, 6 December 2022

We, the leaders of the European Union (EU) and its Member States, in consultation with Western Balkans leaders, and in the presence of regional and international stakeholders, today held this Summit for the first time in the Western Balkans region and concluded the following:

1. **Russia's escalating war of aggression against Ukraine** is putting European and global peace and security at risk and underscores the importance of the strategic partnership between the EU and the Western Balkans region.

2. The EU reconfirms its full and unequivocal commitment to the **European Union membership perspective of the Western Balkans and calls for the acceleration of the accession process**, based upon credible reforms by Partners, fair and rigorous conditionality and the principle of own merits, which is in our mutual interest. It welcomes the progress made by the Western Balkans Partners on their respective EU paths since the EU-Western Balkans Summit at Brdo in October 2021. In particular, the EU welcomes the holding of the first Intergovernmental Conferences with Albania and North Macedonia.

3. The EU welcomes the Western Balkans Partners' **resolve to uphold core European values and principles**, in line with **international law**. The EU also welcomes the restated commitment of the Western Balkans Partners to the primacy of democracy, fundamental rights and values and the rule of law, including separation of powers. It underlines the need for sustained efforts in the fight against corruption and organised crime, strengthened support for good governance, human rights, gender equality and the rights of persons belonging to minorities. The credibility of these commitments depends on the meaningful implementation of the necessary reforms, and on building a solid track record underpinned by clear and consistent public communication in the interest of their people. An empowered civil society and independent and pluralistic media, with full respect for the freedom of expression, are crucial components of any democratic system and we welcome and support the role these play in the Western Balkans.

4. Standing together with the EU is a clear sign of Partners' strategic orientation, now more than ever, as Russia escalates its war of aggression against Ukraine. A common vision of the future involves mutual responsibilities and shared values. As we deepen our cooperation with Partners, we urge them to make swift and sustained progress towards full alignment with the **EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and to act accordingly, including on EU restrictive measures**. We commend those Western Balkans Partners that are already demonstrating their strategic commitment in this regard by **fully aligning** with the EU CFSP and encourage those that have not done so to follow suit.

5. The EU remains the region's **closest partner, main investor and trading partner and principal donor**. The exceptional scale and range of this support should be made more visible and reflected proactively by the Partners in their **public debate** and **communication**, so that citizens can appreciate the concrete benefits of the partnership with the EU.

6. Building on the revised methodology, the European Council has invited the Commission, the High Representative and the Council to further advance the **gradual integration** of the region already during the enlargement process itself in a reversible and merit-based manner.

7. The EU recalls the **importance of continuing reforms,** both for the benefit of citizens and as a basis for continued EU support, notably in the area of **rule of law**, and in particular those reforms related to the independence and functioning of the judiciary and the fight against corruption and organised crime.

8. The EU continues to fully support the Western Balkans Partners' commitment to inclusive **regional cooperation and strengthening good neighbourly relations**, including with EU Member States. Implementing bilateral agreements in good faith and with tangible results, including the Prespa Agreement with Greece and the Treaty on Good Neighbourly Relations with Bulgaria, continues to be important. Decisive further efforts are still required to foster **reconciliation** and regional stability, as well as to find and implement definitive, inclusive and binding solutions to Partners' regional and **bilateral disputes** and **issues** rooted in the legacy of the past, in line with international law and established principles, including the Agreement on Succession Issues, and the remaining cases of missing persons and war crimes issues. The EU also calls on Partners to guarantee the rights and equal treatment of persons belonging to minorities.

9. We continue to fully support the efforts of the **EU High Representative and the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue** and other Western Balkan regional issues and expect concrete progress by the two Parties towards a comprehensive legally binding agreement on normalisation of relations between them. This is critical for the stability and development of the whole region and for ensuring that the Parties can continue on their respective European paths. We reiterate our strong expectation that all past agreements are fully respected and implemented without delay. We urge both Parties to engage constructively to resolve all their bilateral disputes and refrain from unilateral and/or provocative action that could lead to tensions and violence and rhetoric that is not conducive to the Dialogue. We remind both Parties of their shared responsibility to ensure peace and stability.

10. We welcome the successful first meeting of the **European Political Community**, which took place on 6 October 2022 in Prague. The meeting provided a platform for political coordination and an opportunity for in-depth exchanges on pressing issues concerning the entire continent. We look forward to the next meeting to be held in the Republic of Moldova in the first half of 2023.

Tackling together the negative impact of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and building a robust economic foundation for the future

11. **Russia bears the sole responsibility for the current energy and economic crises.** The EU will continue its support for the Western Balkans Partners in tackling the negative effects on their economies and societies.

12. The EU's new **Energy Support Package, worth EUR 1 billion in grants that can bring EUR 2.5 billion in investments, will help the Western Balkans** mitigate the impact of the energy crisis and accelerate the energy transition in the region. The Package is funded via the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III) and includes immediate, short and medium-term measures to provide help to citizens and businesses in the Western Balkans. EUR 500 million in grants will go to immediate support for vulnerable families and SMEs. Another EUR 500 million in grants will be dedicated to investments supporting the energy transition and energy independence, to fund improvements to gas and electricity infrastructure and interconnectors including LNG, as well as new renewable energy projects, energy efficiency measures, upgrades of energy transmission systems, district heating and schemes to improve the energy efficiency of old apartment buildings.

13. We recall our decision to open the **common purchases of gas, LNG and hydrogen** for the Western Balkans, call for rapid operationalisation of this platform and encourage Partners to use this opportunity. The **REPower EU Plan** will help to reduce the EU's and the Western Balkans' dependency on Russian gas. Through the Energy Community, the **EU is opening its electricity market**, including in renewables, to the Western Balkans, subject to regulatory reforms.

14. Continued implementation of the **Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) and the Green and Digital Agendas for the Western Balkans** will help strengthen the region's economy and resilience, including through further support for connectivity, energy transition and diversification of energy supplies. The EIP sets out an ambitious investment package, mobilising close to EUR 30 billion for the region, comprised of EUR 9 billion in grant funding from IPA III and up to EUR 20 billion in investments, leveraged by the new Western Balkans Guarantee Facility. Under the Plan, the adoption of a total of EUR 1.4 billion in investment grants under the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) was approved in the first half of 2022 to finance 28 flagship investment projects with a total value of EUR 4.5 billion. A new package of EUR 400 million in EU grants worth EUR 1.2 billion in investment value, to finance 12 investment projects, has just been approved, while adopted projects are entering the implementation stage. In the past year, work continued on all connectivity investment projects adopted under the connectivity agenda, with several projects reaching completion, notably the Orient-East-Med rail corridor, Road Corridor Vc and two cross-border bridges, Svilaj and Gradiška. In this context, the Western Balkans Partners should also strengthen the **rule of law** and decisively undertake **economic and social reforms,** including those contained in their Economic Reform Programmes and in the joint conclusions of the economic and financial dialogue.

15. Furthermore, the EU stands ready to support the Western Balkans leaders in fulfilling their commitment to **fully implement the Green Agenda** for the region, including their climate commitments under the Paris Agreement, as a key driver for the transition to modern, climate-neutral, climate-resilient and resource-efficient economies, which aims to unlock the potential of circular economy, fight against pollution, improve waste management and accelerate green energy transition in the region. The EU will also continue to support the region in developing a carbon pricing policy in the context of the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), including through technical and financial assistance. The EU 4 Green project is an important tool to help Partners in their implementation efforts.

16. From the start, the Western Balkans Partners have also been included in the **European Food Security Crisis Preparedness and Response Mechanism to enhance food security**. The EU will continue its **support to the agricultural sector** under IPA III and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance for Rural Development (IPARD III), respectively. For the latter, the EU contribution of EUR 560 million for the next seven-year period was adopted earlier this year.

Intensifying political and policy engagement

17. The EU and the Western Balkans are determined **to accelerate and deepen our political and policy engagement**, including inter alia through the holding of regular EU-Western Balkans Summits, the participation of Western Balkans Partners in high-level EU events and regular CFSP dialogues. Western Balkans Partners have already been invited to provide input to the Foreign Affairs Council meetings, and they receive debriefs by the European External Action Service thereafter. This enhanced engagement reflects the EU's commitment to the region.

18. The EU will further **deepen its sectoral cooperation** with the Western Balkans in areas of common interest, such as justice and home affairs, the economy and the EU internal market, energy, transport and digital policy, civil protection, health, social policy, education and research and innovation, as well as foreign affairs, security and defence, including tackling cyber and other hybrid threats, and counter-terrorism.

19. The EU recalls the shared commitment to step up efforts to enhance the **integration of the Western Balkans with the EU internal market**. The Western Balkans' Common Regional Market (CRM) should serve as a stepping stone for integration. The EU commends the Partners' recent agreements on **free movement** and **recognition of IDs** for all citizens of the region, as well as on **mutual recognition of university diplomas** and **professional qualifications** within the region. These agreements constitute milestones in fulfilling the Partners' commitment to establish a Common Regional Market. The EU encourages the Western Balkan Partners to ratify these agreements swiftly so that citizens can benefit from them as fast as possible. Further decisive efforts by all Western Balkans leaders are needed in order for the CRM to become a reality, in particular as regards the adoption of several decisions on trade-related initiatives that have already been agreed at technical level in the context of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). Such inclusive regional cooperation based on EU rules and standards would also stimulate intra-regional trade and attract investments.

20. The EU welcomes the work of all the Western Balkan economies towards the **modernisation of their payments systems** to bring them closer to EU standards and to the fulfilment of all the conditions for the integration into the Single Euro Payments Area.

21. The EU also welcomes Partners' commitment to continue their work on the implementation of the Western Balkans agenda on innovation, research, education, culture, youth and sport and is already gradually associating Partners in EU's programmes such as **Erasmus+**, **the European Solidarity Corps** and the **European Universities initiative** with the aim of creating further opportunities for **young people**. The European Universities Initiative opens the possibility for higher education institutions in the Western Balkans to participate in ambitious transnational alliances and to develop long-term structural and strategic cooperation. The **Youth Guarantee** put into action in the Western Balkans will contribute to reducing the brain drain experienced by the region.

22. In the **digital domain**, building on the successful implementation of the Regional Roadmap Agreement "Roam like at Home" from July 2021 onwards, eliminating roaming costs within the region, we welcome today's joint declaration by EU and the Western Balkans' telecom operators which will allow for the first **reduction in roaming costs between the EU and the Western Balkans in 2023, with a view to full removal thereafter**. It is also commendable that Partners have signed up to the Declaration for the Future of Internet and are fully associated with the work of the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications.

23. We also welcome the progress in the implementation of **EU-Western Balkans Green Lanes** and call for their application at all relevant borders, while fully respecting the EU *acquis* and procedures. We furthermore welcome the establishment of the Blue Lanes initiative that will improve trade connections among Adriatic ports. These initiatives contribute to better border management, decrease in waiting times for passengers and freight, and hence support the economic activity. They are a very public demonstration of what cooperation between the Western Balkans and the EU and its Member States can bring.

Reinforcing security and building resilience against foreign interference

24. The EU and the Western Balkans share a **number of security challenges** that demand coordinated action, which has become even more important in the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. The EU and the Western Balkans are determined to **further strengthen the cooperation on core security and defence issues, including at operational level**. In this regard, we welcome that Partners have proven their commitment to the **Common Security and Defence Policy** (**CSDP**), by contributing to EU's crisis management missions and operations. The EU will continue to work together with the region to further develop its defence capabilities and capacities, including through the **European Peace Facility**. The EU welcomes the Partners' continued commitment to the development of effective instruments for **intra-Western Balkans cooperation in the area of security and defence**. The EU will also further enhance its engagement with the region in fields such as **space** and **military mobility**.

25. The EU and the Western Balkans are committed to fighting **foreign information manipulation and interference**, including disinformation as well as other hybrid threats that are present in Western Balkans societies and seek to undermine the region's stability, democratic processes and its EU perspective. In this respect, we will further strengthen our cooperation **to build resilience**, also by fostering media professionalism and media literacy, and by increasing the impact of our **strategic communication** about EU - Western Balkans relations and the enlargement process in particular.

26. As cyber threats know no borders, **we will work together to enhance our collective cyber security**. Recent large scale cyber-attacks demonstrate the need for enhanced engagement, building on existing programmes and on cooperation with the EU Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) and the European Cybersecurity Competence Centre, combined with bilateral initiatives of EU Member States and other partners. Under the Cybersecurity Rapid Response project, EU action is focusing on increasing the cyber resilience and cyber incident preparedness of Partners targeted by recent attacks, with delivery of longer-term region-wide EU cyber support to start in 2023. The EU is determined to step up its support for resilience against cyber-attacks in the Western Balkans, and intensify cooperation regionally and with international partners.

Irregular migration, fight against terrorism and organised crime

27. The Western Balkans migratory route has seen a significant upsurge since the beginning of 2022. **Migration management remains a joint challenge and responsibility**, which the EU and the Western Balkans will address together, in close partnership. To this end, the EU has substantially increased its financial support for the region with over EUR 170 million of bilateral and regional assistance already provided under IPA III.

28. While we commend our Partners for their efforts and constructive **cooperation** to date, sustained and expanded efforts are required in order to address irregular migration on the Western Balkans route, including to combat smuggling of migrants and human trafficking. The EU remains committed to support the region, both politically and financially. In this regard, it intends to substantially increase funding to the Western Balkans for the coming years in the framework of IPA III. In light of the increased migratory pressure in the region, the strong financial EU support through dedicated programmes will allow Partners to enhance asylum and reception systems, strengthen border protection, fight smuggling networks and organised crime groups, and step up returns from the Western Balkans to the countries of origin. With a view to that, the EU has adopted a new programme on strengthening border management worth EUR 40 million, and is preparing a second one on increasing the capacity to fight migrant smuggling and human trafficking, with a focus on investigations and prosecutions, worth EUR 30 million.

29. Partners' swift alignment with **EU visa policy** is of urgent and crucial importance for migration management and for the overall good functioning and sustainability of the visa-free regimes between the Western Balkans and the EU. Partners must continue to enhance their return systems, including by concluding readmission agreements with key countries of origin and to strengthen cooperation with relevant airlines. Mutual cooperation on returns will be deepened, maximising the use of existing frameworks and available channels. In this regard, the EU stands ready to support the Western Balkans to increase voluntary and non-voluntary returns, including directly from the region to the countries of origin. Cooperation should also be intensified with Frontex, including through the rapid conclusion and implementation of updated Status Agreements, as well as with the European Union Agency for Asylum and with Europol.

30. We call for **cooperation to be further strengthened on counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism**, including the prevention of radicalisation and of terrorist financing, in line with the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans. We reiterate the importance of taking resolute action to address serious and organised crime, in particular **money laundering, high-level corruption, drug cultivation and trafficking**.

31. The EU is fully committed to continue the work on **preventing illicit trade and trafficking in small arms and light weapons** and their ammunition, commends the Western Balkans' dedicated roadmap on this and will continue to support the Western Balkans in this field. The roadmap is an internationally recognised example of good practice of regional cooperation to strengthen small arms control.

32. The EU encourages Western Balkan Partners to establish and maintain cooperative relations with the **European Public Prosecutors Office (EPPO)** in the field of mutual legal assistance in criminal matters. We welcome the working arrangements already established between the EPPO and some Western Balkans Partners, and we encourage the other Partners towards similar cooperation as soon as possible.

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33. We welcome our Western Balkans Partners' alignment with the above points.