

CHAIR'S CONCLUSIONS

Nine years after the launching of Berlin Process in August 2014, the Heads of Government of Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, as well as the Heads of State or Government or representatives of Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovenia and the United Kingdom, Spain, Hungary, Romania and the Netherlands, the representatives of the European Union (EU), and of regional and international organizations and financial institutions met in person in Tirana on 16 October 2023 for the Summit Meeting of the Berlin Process.

The participants emphasized the importance of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans in the current context of geopolitical uncertainty and war on European soil. They highlighted the importance of strengthening connectivity, transport, trade, energy and digital ties in the Western Balkans as well as between the region and the EU.

Building on the Ministerial Meetings of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Interior and Economy, and Roma Integration Forum, as well as the Leaders' Dialogue on Climate Partnership, the Business Forum, Youth Forum, Civil Society Forum, the Digital Summit and the Joint Science Conference in the past few weeks, the participants took stock of the progress, ongoing challenges and prospects for regional cooperation in the Western Balkans as a stepping stone towards the gradual integration of the region in the EU policies, mechanisms and instruments.

The Western Balkans Six (WB6) welcomed the announcement of a Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, as outlined by the President of the European Commission in May 2023, and expressed their commitment to the advancement of the regional economic integration through the Common Regional Market through acceleration of domestic reforms, particularly in the area of the rule of law and fight against organized crime.

The WB6 participants expressed the need to bridge the socio-economic gap and enhance convergence between the Western Balkans and the European Union. To that end, they voiced their interest in stepping up cooperation among themselves and, where possible, with the EU on a number of policy areas, such as the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA), facilitating trade and transport, telecommunications and digitalization, climate, energy, agriculture, security, youth, education and science, and Roma integration.

The WB6 participants supported a structured periodic monitoring of the economic convergence of the Western Balkans towards the EU.

The WB6 participants expressed interest in exploring avenues of participation in meetings and fora with the EU, where issues of common interest are discussed.

Common Regional Market (CRM) and Improving Convergence between EU and Western Balkans

The participants welcomed the signing of the Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Nurses, Veterinary Surgeons, Pharmacists and Midwives that will advance the mobility of professionals in the Western Balkans.

Further, the participants welcomed the entry into force of the three mobility agreements signed in Berlin in November 2022 for Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia and called for ratification/approval of these agreements by all of Western Balkans partners.

Building on the conclusions of the Ministerial Meeting of Ministers of Economy, participants recognized the importance of the European Union's Single Euro Payment Area (SEPA), which is tasked to effectively bring domestic and cross-border payments within the SEPA to the same level of cost, time efficiency and safety. They underlined the importance of reducing the costs of cross-border payments, also through setting up instant payment systems, facilitating supply of services of non-bank payment providers, further development of the FinTech industry in the region, enabling the use of QR code-initiated payments and of adopting a framework to limit the cost of intra-CEFTA payments at the benefit of consumers and businesses.

The participants warmly welcomed the entry into force of the reduced data roaming charges between the EU and the Western Balkans as of 1 October, based on the Roaming Declaration, facilitated by the Regional Cooperation Council with the strong support of European Commission, that was signed between the 38 Western Balkans and EU operators at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tirana, in December 2022.

The participants commended the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the Central European Free Trade Agreement Secretariat (CEFTA) for their support in the implementation of policy agendas under the Common Regional Market and their coordinating role in the negotiation of the CRM mobility agreements, thus contributing to higher economic convergence between the EU and the Western Balkans.

The participants noted that further significant progress should be made with regard to the implementation of the Common Regional Market Action Plan by the time of the next Berlin Process Summit Meeting and called upon RCC, CEFTA and other regional organization to start devising the next phase.

Youth, Education and Research

The Western Balkans Six participants expressed their wish on the advancement of gradual integration of the Western Balkans education, science and youth institutions and policies into related EU areas and mechanisms.

The participants commended the signing of the Agreement between the College of Europe, the Ministry of Education and Sports of the Republic of Albania and the Municipality of Tirana on 6 October 2023, which paves the way to the opening of the College of Europe campus in Tirana. The participants stressed the importance of this institution to prepare professionals and experts on EU affairs across the entire region, as well as to foster a sense of mutual understanding and belonging. They also praised the European Commission's swift support of the project.

The participants welcomed the recommendations of the Joint Science Conference held in Tirana, between 18 and 20 September 2023, regarding the need to boost investments in research and innovation, as well as to establish Research and Technology Excellence Hubs and Universities of Excellence in the Western Balkans, as well as regional research funds. These actions should contribute to a stronger integration of the Western Balkans into the European Research Area and the European Education Area. They welcomed the recommendation to renew and expand the Widening call for the Western Balkans in Horizon Europe. They also commended the regional transnational cooperation and mobility in higher education, research, and innovation.

The participants welcomed the Conclusions of the Western Balkans Youth Forum held in Albania on 6 October 2023. Building on these Conclusions, the participants underlined the importance of strengthening and expanding current regional mechanisms and EU schemes to further benefit youth mobility and cultural exchanges in the Western Balkans, as a way to promote inclusive peacebuilding and reconciliation in the region. They also commended the Forum's emphasis on including compulsory green education in formal curricula, as well as on the participation of young people in civic activities and the public sphere.

Including Western Balkans in the EU Value Chain Partnership

The participants acknowledged that with the current geopolitical situation, a Value Chain Partnership between the EU and the Western Balkans should be explored. They acknowledged the strategic importance of the Western Balkans region in the context of Critical Raw Materials and batteries, and its role in the EU Value Chain and industries. With the increasing global demand for these materials, the Western Balkans hold a significant potential that must be harnessed effectively to contribute to the EU's security of supply.

Participants underlined that investments in research, innovation, and sustainable mining practices should be prioritized, with an aim to increase the region's contribution to the EU's Critical Raw Materials and industry value chain. Such an increase would not only enhance the EU's security of supply but also promote economic growth and job creation in the Western Balkans.

The participants highlighted the importance of adopting a sustainable and inclusive approach in harnessing the potential of the Western Balkans in the common raw materials and EU Value Chain that takes into account environmental and social considerations.

The WB6 participants stated their interest to become part of the EU Value Chain Partners Club for Critical Raw Materials and get support for the development of relevant industries, aligned with the needs and standards of the EU Single Market.

Trade, Transport and Digital Connectivity

The Western Balkans Six participants stressed the importance of boosting investment in transport and railway connectivity in the Western Balkans and between the Western Balkans and the EU.

The participants confirmed that regional economic cooperation and enhanced economic relations with the EU go hand in hand with better connectivity between the region and the EU.

Participants expressed full support for the Joint Transport Community-CEFTA Declaration on ‘Taking forward the Green Lanes’ issued at the Connectivity Summit in Budva on 15 and 16 May, and the follow-up work on the Roadmap for Green Lanes and coordinated controls at the EU-WB6 border crossing points. They underlined the importance of furthering customs cooperation between the region and European Union. In that regard, they stated their support for the extension of the second phase of the Trade and Transport Facilitation Project with interventions that are aimed at improving connectivity in the Western Balkans and between the region and the EU. The Western Balkans participants stressed the need to accelerate the implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan and extend CEFTA-TCT Green Lanes to all main border crossing points with the EU Member States, as well as to improve the infrastructure conditions and operations on those border crossing points. In the same spirit, they called for full implementation of the Green Lanes with the EU and the electronic exchange of pre-arrival data in both directions, followed by the establishment of an adequate legal base.

The WB6 participants stated that in addition to stepping up investments in the transport infrastructure, it is important to ensure a) careful prioritization of investments, informed by current and future traffic flows, b) closer coordination among the Western Balkans and EU Member States bordering on the region; and c) strategic mobilization of funding resources including lending, grant financing and private investment.

The participants commended the inclusion of the Corridor VIII railway section from Skopje to Durres in the extended TEN-T Core Network. They called upon the EU and international financial institutions (IFIs) to invest in this project of strategic importance, both from an economic and a security perspective.

The WB6 participants asked for enhanced trade facilitation efforts on the part of the European Commission and CEFTA. This includes efforts to reduce long waiting times at key border/common crossing points with the EU Member States, time and cost spent on import and export processes, uncertainty about transit times undermining competitiveness of exports, and difficulties for Western Balkans companies to demonstrate the quality of their products and compliance with EU standards.

The participants welcomed the signing of association agreements between the European Commission and the EU candidate countries on the Digital Europe Program in June 2023. They highlighted the importance of improving digital and broadband connectivity infrastructure, as well as legal and regulatory framework between the EU and the Western Balkans in the digital area, including cybersecurity.

The Western Balkans Six participants emphasized the need for increased investments in interconnectivity and infrastructure, and capacity building in relation to the acquis implementation concerning the environment, transport and energy sectors. The participants appreciated the work done by RCC in facilitating and coordinating regional activities related to the spread of new technologies and recognized progress made so far in these areas.

Implementing the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans

Participants welcomed the outcomes of the Leaders' Dialogue in June 2023 and the establishment of the Regional Climate Partnership between the WB6 and Germany, with the objective to jointly accelerate the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. Accordingly, the Leaders of the Western Balkans Six and of the Federal Republic of Germany endorsed the Joint Declaration of Intent on the Regional Climate Partnership. They stated therein the intention to advance their climate-related strategic dialogue and expand cooperation for a socially just and green transition in areas such as energy, with a focus on energy efficiency and renewables, sustainable urban development, tourism, transport, agriculture. They stressed the relevance of boosting private sector investments in these areas. They welcomed the commitment of the Federal Republic of Germany to support this transition with an initial package of Euro 1 billion, including grants and development loans until 2030 through the KfW Development Bank, as well as the additionally pledged budgetary support of Euro 500 million through promotional loans in the short term.

Following the last year's Declaration on energy security and green transition in the Western Balkans, the Western Balkans participants, reinforced their strong commitment to the common green transition objectives underpinned by the Energy Community Decarbonisation Road Map, in the context of the Green Agenda for Western Balkans.

They also welcomed the increased support of the French Development Agency (AFD), which has engaged EUR 1 billion in the Western Balkans since 2019 in support of efforts in a wide range of key sectors for the European integration of the region, namely energy and ecological transition, urban development, transport and economic inclusion.

The Western Balkans participants highlighted the importance of aligning legislation with EU in the energy sector, with a view of enabling full market integration, decarbonization, acceleration of the uptake of renewables and reducing greenhouse gas emissions that is compliant with the EU energy sector acquis under the Energy Community Treaty.

The participants agreed on the need for enhanced cooperation in the areas of agriculture, food, rural development and forestry to effectively address sustainability and food security challenges.

The participants acknowledged the substantial efforts of the Standing Working Group for Regional Rural Development (SWG).

In that regard, it was emphasized that the ongoing policy coordination in climate change adaptation, soil protection, organic farming, agricultural knowledge, and innovation systems (AKIS), wine regulation and forestry need to be reinforced. In addition, other aspects of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans should be addressed, such as the alignment with EU standards on food safety, plant health and animal welfare, environment, enhanced sanitary controls and traceability, as well as fostering renewable energy production in rural areas. Participants acknowledged and appreciated the role of Germany and other EU Member States, including France, to help toward that aim and called on the EU and other international development organizations to support these efforts.

Further, participants commended the work and role of the Regional Cooperation Council in coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and reiterated the necessity to coordinate support for all partners, including local governments, to achieve the commitments of Sofia Declaration and align with EU standards and practices.

Participants have agreed to take action, increase regional cooperation, and enhance the regulatory framework to prevent plastic pollution, including marine pollution.

Security

The participants stressed the importance of deeper regional cooperation in policy areas related to security. They also reiterated the critical need for a higher level of information sharing between the Western Balkans and the EU Joint Task Forces, and for joint exercises to tackle specific aspects of organized crime, such as human trafficking, migrant smuggling, and drugs trafficking as the way forward.

The participants stressed that building stronger cooperation in the area of cybersecurity is critical, including coordinated operational and technical support, and setting a platform to enable early warnings of cyber threats and share practices and experience.

On this note, the participants welcomed the signature of the tripartite intergovernmental agreement establishing the Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre and recognized its potential to promote regional cooperation in the domain of cyber resilience.

The Western Balkans Six participants expressed their desire to see stepped up efforts towards the integrated border management (IBM) and asked for support in relation to capacity building, digitalization and border security, as well as for better communication and coordination with EU law enforcement agencies, including the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), the EU Cybersecurity Emergency Incident Review Mechanisms, etc. They called for an ongoing high-level dialogue on cybersecurity and closer coordination at a regional level, as facilitated by the Regional Cooperation Council.

Bilateral Issues and Good Neighbourly Relations

Participants expressed concern over the recent rise of tensions between Serbia and Kosovo leading to and in the aftermath of the attack on Kosovo police and the killing of a Kosovo police sergeant and the wounding of three others, on 24 September. They stressed that the recent developments threaten peace, security, and cooperation in the region, and they push back the reconciliation efforts of the EU, and other strategic partners, in the Western Balkans.

Participants encouraged European efforts to engage with the parties, with the aim to unblock the EU-facilitated normalization dialogue and, by doing so, unblock regional cooperation and respective EU paths of the WB6. In this spirit, participants underlined the need for joint European efforts and tailor-made mechanisms for economic development, youth, and education, as well as for people-to-people contacts and inter-group civil society cooperation.

The participants voiced concern that bilateral issues among Berlin Process participants may continue to obstruct respective EU paths in the region. The Western Balkans Six participants asked for the continuous support of EU and the EU participating States for the efforts of the Western Balkans in the area of strengthening rule of law, fight against organized crime and in their EU accession paths.

The participants reaffirmed the importance of regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations for the region's EU prospects. The Western Balkans participants proposed that a robust conditionality regarding implementation of regional commitments and good neighbourly relations in the Western Balkans be included in the Growth Plan implementing criteria.

Roma Integration

The participants appreciated progress on the implementation of the Poznan Declaration of Western Balkans partners on Roma integration within the enlargement process. The leaders of the WB6 welcomed and formally adopted the conclusions of the Fourth Roma Ministerial held in Skopje, on 22 September. These conclusions clearly identify the intermediate steps needed to implement the commitments on Roma integration in the fields of education, employment, the regularization of informal settlements, in the digital field and on civil registration.

Future of Berlin Process

Participants welcomed Germany's willingness to host the next Leaders' Summit in 2024, on the 10th anniversary of the Berlin Process.