

Ahead of the EU-Western Balkans Brdo Summit



**EPP Declaration adopted at the EPP
EU-Western Balkans Summit**

05 October 2021

Fundamentally united by our common EPP values, based on this shared community of principles and the joint commitment to international law and fundamental values, as well as on the principles upon which the EU was founded, notably those of peace, friendship, solidarity, responsibility, prosperity, freedom, democracy, non-discrimination of persons belonging to minorities, respect for diversity, rule of law and human dignity,

reiterating the ‘EPP EU-Western Balkan declaration’ passed in Sofia in May 2018¹,

*being the driving force behind EU integration and recalling the 2000 Zagreb Summit, the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, 2018 Sofia Summit and 2020 Zagreb Summit, and reiterating **our strong and unequivocal support for a credible enlargement process and European Union accession perspective** for the six Western Balkan partners, which is also seen as a geostrategic goal of the Union,*

reiterating that the future of the Western Balkans lies within the European Union,

*reaffirming the need of the Western Balkan countries to **strengthen good neighbourly relations** and regional stability as a matter of priority and reiterating that the **sovereignty and integrity** of all Western Balkan countries must be fully respected,*

The EPP’s EU and Western Balkan leaders met in Ljubljana on 5 October 2021, agreed on the following statement and hereby align themselves with the points stated above and below:

1. **Trust** among Western Balkan partners — among all political parties and stakeholders, internally and externally, including vis-à-vis the EU — must be reinforced. We need to address each one’s difficulties and concerns. We need to rebuild trust. And we need to deliver on our enlargement promises as well as our Western Balkan partners’ need to deliver on all necessary reforms: especially strengthening the **rule of law**, the **fight against corruption**, the **independence of justice** and **media freedom**.

The entire EU integration process is a **shared responsibility**. We strongly believe EU-Western Balkan relations must be based on **sincere and close cooperation, reciprocity, strict but fair conditionality**, and **predictability**.

Enlargement remains one of the EU’s most successful policies, with transformational effects in the Western Balkans. The entire enlargement process has to provide concrete results and to be more political, more dynamic, more tangible and more appealing to the population, especially to the youth and other stakeholders in the region.

Full EU membership for all Western Balkans partners remains the ultimate goal. We underline that every candidate and potential candidate aspiring to EU membership must be judged on its **own merits** in terms of fulfilling, implementing and complying with the same set of criteria for determining the timetable for EU accession.

2. Since the onset of the **pandemic**, global solidarity and responsibility have been key for the EU — especially towards its closest neighbours. The EU has demonstrated its strong commitment to and engagement with Western Balkan countries through enhanced coordination

1 <https://www.epp.eu/files/uploads/2018/05/EU-Western-Balkan-Summit-Declaration-Adop.pdf>

in the fight against COVID-19. Cooperation in the field of public health has been significantly strengthened in recent months to support the region during the pandemic; and unprecedented financial and political support, as well as privileged access to several EU mechanisms and programmes, has been provided. Furthermore, we recognise the valuable support which the countries of the Western Balkans have shown during the pandemic, both to each other and towards Europe.

3. We welcome the comprehensive **Economic and Investment Plan** as well as the **Green Agenda for the Western Balkans**, adopted by the Commission — focusing on green and digital transition investments, smart mobility links, sustainable energy and digital infrastructure — as one example of renewed EU commitment.
4. We welcome the entry into force of the new generation of the **Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance** (IPA III) offering means and support to the Western Balkans for the necessary reforms on their path of European integration.
5. We strongly believe the EU must move towards holding **regular EU-Western Balkans summits**, supporting the proposal of the current Slovenian Presidency, in order to strengthen political ownership of the enlargement process and to ensure better high-level engagement and direction — goals also set out in the revised enlargement methodology.
6. We call for **increased EU presence** on the ground — including through visits, missions and representations — and at the same time encourage our Western Balkan partners to meet their counterparts and stakeholders in Brussels and throughout the European Union.
7. We need to **start EU accession negotiations** with **Albania** and **North Macedonia, based on the political decision from March 2020**. This means adopting as soon as possible their respective Negotiating Frameworks, while underlining that the accession process is a two-way street bringing along both duties and responsibilities.
8. We call for accession negotiations with **Serbia** and **Montenegro** to accelerate in line with own merits in meeting accession criteria, following the principles of the revised enlargement methodology — which both countries have already accepted — increasing the dynamism of these countries' reform agendas and strengthening their European geopolitical orientation.
9. We call on the EU and on Member States to support **Bosnia and Herzegovina** (BiH) in addressing the 14 key priorities, including electoral and constitutional reforms, in line with EU principles and in the international and constitutional courts' decisions, in order to move forward towards candidate status. We call on the local authorities and political representatives to work closely together with the European Union, the International Community and the Office of the High Representative.
10. We call on EU Member States to grant long-overdue **visa liberalisation to Kosovo** without further delay. At the same time, we support the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina for the sake of the whole region.
11. We recognise the need for strong and appropriate involvement, perspective and signals vis-à-vis Western Balkan partners within the framework of the **Conference on the Future of Eu-**

rope, both at governmental and civil society levels. Citizens from the Western Balkans, especially the youth, should contribute to shaping the future of the European Union.

12. We call for the involvement of partners along the Western Balkan route within the framework of the recently proposed **New Pact on Immigration and Asylum**, to work together to tackle the common challenge of irregular migration. Given the seriousness of the situation in Afghanistan, we will work closely together to tackle the developing challenges and coordinate common responses, as necessary.
13. We call urgently for **intensified further cooperation** with the region — this need not wait until the completion of the EU enlargement process:
 - a. We should examine the possibilities for lowering the roaming costs between the EU and the Western Balkans.
 - b. We should fully associate the region in Horizon Europe research and EU professional training programmes.
 - c. We should strengthen the position of all ‘Western Balkan 6’ within the framework of Erasmus+.
 - d. The region has huge economic potential and is fast-growing. And the region must not only be defined by politics. We have to support our SMEs to invest more in the region in order to become an investment hub within Europe, bringing global value-chains closer to the core of our continent (i.e. nearshoring).
5. Stronger regional resilience is needed vis-à-vis **third actors**, whose interests and actions are often opposed to EU values and EU integration policies. The EU needs a clear positioning vis-à-vis competitors like China, Russia, Turkey and others; a more coordinated approach with the USA will be particularly helpful. We reiterate our expectation that Western Balkan partners will further deepen their cooperation in the area of **Common Foreign and Security Policy** (CFSP) and make credible and sustained progress towards full alignment with EU foreign policy positions.
6. As made clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, challenges such as **disinformation** and other hybrid activities can only be fought together by building resilience and collaborating on cyber security and strategic communication. Western Balkan leaders must tackle disinformation more effectively without running the risk of jeopardising our common positive intentions and the success of our common project. Leaders must tackle disinformation and hate speech more effectively, securing a whole-of-government approach and supporting a whole-of-society approach in dealing with disinformation as a form of hybrid influence. In practice, this means:
 - a. securing **media literacy education** in public schools and via publicly funded media;
 - b. securing **transparency of media ownership**;
 - c. allowing media and especially broadcasting regulators to facilitate open space for **credible professional journalism**, which is key to successfully countering disinformation across the world, including within the EU.

Conclusions

The EU's strongest tool is not only the enlargement process per se but its combination with a **credible EU perspective** for all six Western Balkan partners.

The EU cannot offer all-encompassing solutions to the crises of the region. Nonetheless, we will only be able to proceed successfully with further European enlargement if we treat this process as a **shared responsibility**: to implement the process, stick to promises, implement reforms, positively communicate and show unambiguous dedication. We continue to count on all our EPP member parties, especially from the region, to fully support this process.

We cannot compromise on values and rights: the more, the stronger and **the faster the European Union takes an inclusive approach** towards the Western Balkans, **the stronger will be the support** of national, regional and local societies to join the Union.

All efforts must be made so we can proceed more swiftly towards the **political and geographical unity of Europe**, in order to be whole, stable and at peace.

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**If you have any question
you would like to ask
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