

**EU-Western Balkans Summit**  
**Brussels Declaration, 13 December 2023**

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 concluded the following:

1. The increasingly complex geo-strategic environment, dominated by **Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine** and heavily marked by the crisis in the Middle East, continues to put European and global security at risk. It demonstrates the importance of unity and purpose within the European family and of the strategic partnership between the EU and the Western Balkans region bringing about ever closer ties and deeper cooperation with the EU, based on shared principles and values.
2. Recalling the Thessaloniki Agenda and the Sofia, Zagreb, Brdo and Tirana Declarations, 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. The EU welcomes the progress made by the Western Balkans partners on their respective EU paths since the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tirana. The future of the Western Balkans is in our Union.

3. The EU welcomes the **resolve of the Western Balkans partners to respect and commit to 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. In line with the Tirana Declaration of December 2022, the EU underlines the need for sustained and irreversible **reform achievements on the rule of law**, the functioning of democratic institutions, the economy and public administration reform. The EU underscores 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.
  
4. Standing together with the EU is a clear sign of the partners' strategic orientation, now more than ever, in light of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and other security challenges. The EU will continue to invest in multilateralism and will cooperate with partners to defend and uphold the rules-based international order. A common vision of the future involves shared values and mutual responsibilities. As we deepen our cooperation with partners, we urge them to make swift and sustained progress towards full alignment with the **EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), including on EU restrictive measures and to act accordingly**. We commend those Western Balkan partners that are already demonstrating their strategic commitment by **fully aligning** with the EU's CFSP and encourage those that have not yet done so to follow suit. We stress the importance of improved enforcement of restrictive measures and the prevention of their circumvention.

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. Partners should also communicate clearly about their own commitment to EU values and the necessary reforms.
6. The EU underscores the need for the commitment by the Western Balkans partners 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 of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation with Bulgaria, continues to be important. Decisive further efforts are still required to foster reconciliation and regional stability, as well as to find and to 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.
7. 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**. We expect constructive engagement from the two Parties in good faith and in the spirit of compromise to make rapid progress in normalising their relations, which is critical for the security and stability of the whole region and for ensuring that the Parties can advance on their respective European paths. We urge the Parties to fully implement the **Agreement on the Path to Normalisation and its Implementation Annex** as well as all past Agreements, without any further delays or preconditions. We also expect the Parties to pursue sustained de-escalation efforts in line with the EU's requests and refrain from unilateral and uncoordinated actions that could lead to further tensions and violence, and rhetoric that is not conducive to normalisation of relations.

8. We welcome the successful meetings of the **European Political Community**, which took place on 6 October 2022 in Prague, on 1 June 2023 in Chişinău and on 5 October 2023 in Granada. The meetings provided a platform for political coordination and opportunities for in-depth exchanges on pressing issues concerning the entire continent.

### **Bringing partners closer to the EU and advancing gradual integration**

9. The EU aims to **bring the Western Balkans closer to the EU**, preparing the ground for accession, and bringing concrete benefits to their citizens already during the enlargement process. To this end, the EU intends to explore additional measures aimed at further advancing **gradual integration**. The EU underlines the importance of fully using the potential of existing legal instruments. Building on the revised methodology, the EU recalls the European Council's invitation to further advance the gradual integration of the region already during the enlargement process itself in a reversible and merit-based manner.
10. In this context, the recent Commission's Communication on the new **Growth Plan** for the Western Balkans aims to accelerate **socio-economic convergence** between the Western Balkans and the EU and encourages the region to step up the pace of EU-related reforms, and to advance regional economic integration through the Common Regional Market (CRM), based on EU rules and standards.
11. The EU is ready to examine proposals made in the Growth Plan for **enhancing economic integration of the Western Balkans with the EU**. The EU notes that proposals made are subject to the Western Balkans aligning with the EU's single market rules and opening the relevant sectors and areas to all their neighbours, in line with the CRM, while fully preserving the integrity of the EU single market and the level playing field.

12. The EU welcomes the signing of the fourth mobility Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Nurses, Veterinary Surgeons, Pharmacists and Midwives at the Berlin Process Summit in October 2023 that will advance the mobility of professionals in the Western Balkans. The EU also welcomes the entry into force of the three mobility agreements on the **freedom of movement with identity cards** for citizens of the region, as well as on **mutual recognition of university diplomas** and **professional qualifications** within the region signed last year. The EU encourages the remaining Western Balkan partners to ratify these agreements swiftly so that citizens can benefit from them as soon as possible.
13. 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' CRM should serve as a stepping stone for integration. 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. The EU invites the region, with the help of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), CEFTA and the WB6 Chamber Investment Forum (CIF), to prepare an ambitious successor to the current CRM action plan before the current one expires in 2024.
14. 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.

15. **Transport and connectivity** are essential for economic development, as they foster better regional integration and improve relations between neighbours. Through the Transport Community, the EU has opened the possibility for closer integration of the Western Balkans in the field of transport, in particular through regulatory reforms. In this regard, the EU encourages the partners to proceed in an ambitious manner with the needed reforms. The EU welcomes the high-level agreements revising the indicative extension of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) to the Western Balkans and the proposal to establish the **Western Balkans-Eastern Mediterranean European Transport Corridor**. The EU will support Western Balkan partners in integrating road transport markets on the basis of the adoption of the relevant EU *acquis*. We also welcome the progress made in terms of 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 and transport connections among Adriatic ports. These initiatives contribute to better border management, reduced waiting times for passengers and freight, and hence bolster economic activity. They underline the positive impact of furthering customs cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans. The EU acknowledges the efforts of the Transport Community and CEFTA in developing a Roadmap for implementing Green Lanes and synchronised border controls. Moreover, the EU is dedicated to supporting the modernisation of the railway network in the region and encourages Western Balkan efforts to reinstate passenger rail connections between major cities in the region as well as between the region and its EU neighbours.

16. The EU recalls its determination 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, the Energy Community and the Sofia Declaration on a Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, as a key driver for the transition to modern, climate-neutral, climate-resilient and resource-efficient economies. The EU will continue to **support the decarbonisation** of the region also through technical assistance, particularly for the scale-up of renewable energies. The EU4Green project is an important tool to help partners in their implementation efforts. The EU will continue to support the region in developing and implementing climate and energy transition policy, including carbon pricing based on robust monitoring, reporting and verification of emissions as well as policies.
17. In relation to integration in the EU's **Digital Single Market**, building on the successful implementation of the Regional Roaming Agreement 'Roam like at Home' from July 2021, we welcome the **reduction in data roaming costs** between the EU and the Western Balkans as of 1 October 2023, with a view to developing a long-term roaming arrangement to include the region in the EU's 'Roam like at Home' area. The Western Balkans should also strive to step-up their efforts in the area of **digital transformation and media**, notably on cybersecurity reforms and by ensuring the secure deployment of 5G networks through the comprehensive implementation of the EU 5G Cybersecurity Toolbox. To further promote digital connectivity, we welcome the intention to develop the WIFI4WB initiative providing free access to WIFI connectivity for citizens and visitors in public spaces.
18. In connection to the **integration of the Western Balkans into industrial supply chains**, we welcome the interest expressed by the Western Balkan partners to become part of the EU Value Chain Partners for **Critical Raw Materials** and obtain support for the development of relevant industries, aligned with the needs and standards of the EU single market.

19. Recalling the 2021 Brdo and the 2022 Tirana declarations, the EU is committed to **accelerating and further deepening its political and policy engagement with the Western Balkans**, including inter alia through the holding of regular EU-Western Balkans Summits, the participation of Western Balkan partners in high-level EU events and regular CFSP dialogues and increasing cooperation in multilateral fora. Western Balkan partners have already been invited to provide input to the Foreign Affairs Council meetings, and receive regular debriefs on these meetings. The recent EU-Western Balkans Ministerial meeting in November further intensified the engagement in the area of CFSP, and the EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Forum in October in Skopje on justice and home affairs.
20. The EU strongly welcomes the establishment of a new branch of the **College of Europe** in Tirana and the launch of application process for the first academic year 2024-2025. This campus will equip students from the Western Balkans and beyond with expert knowledge on EU affairs and give students from EU Member States the regional expertise, hence it will also promote mutual understanding and belonging.
21. The EU also recalls its continued support to the reforming and **capacity-building of public administrations** in the Western Balkans, provided notably through grants, twinning as well as through the Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA).



22. The EU also welcomes partners' commitment to accelerating their work on the implementation of the Western Balkans agenda on innovation, research, education, culture, youth and sport. Apart from participation in Horizon Europe and Creative Europe, the EU is gradually associating partners in EU programmes such as **Erasmus+** and **the European Solidarity Corps** and opening participation under the **European Universities initiative** to all Western Balkans partners with the aim of creating further opportunities for **young people**. The **Youth Guarantee** and the Innovation Support Measures put in place in the Western Balkans will help reduce the skill-mismatch and brain drain experienced by the region. The next **Ministerial meeting of the Western Balkans Steering Platforms** should contribute to further strengthening cooperation with the region in these policy areas and keeping the political momentum. The EU welcomes the Regional Youth Cooperation Office's (RYCO) important role in enhancing cooperation and reconciliation among young people in the Western Balkans.

### **Building a robust economic foundation for the future and tackling together the negative impact of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine**

23. **Russia bears sole responsibility** for the continuing **energy and economic crises**. The weaponisation of energy, food, and information has affected the Western Balkan partners, particularly targeting those who fully align with the EU's CFSP and its restrictive measures. In order to mitigate the impact of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the EU is determined to further **intensify its political engagement** with the Western Balkans region, in addition to the assistance already provided through the **Instrument of Pre-accession assistance, the Economic and Investment Plan, the Energy Support Package, the European Peace Facility**, as well as the support contributing to **building cyber resilience and addressing Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)**.

24. The EU will continue its support for the Western Balkan partners in tackling the negative effects on their economies and societies, notably through the EU's **Energy Support Package, worth EUR 1 billion in grants that can bring EUR 2.5 billion in investments. 90% (EUR 450 million)** of the first half of the package, to cushion the energy price increase to SMEs and vulnerable households, has already **been disbursed**. The remaining EUR 500 million in grants is provided by the EU through the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) to advance the energy transition and energy independence, to support renewable energy projects, to finance improvements to energy infrastructure and interconnectors, including LNG, to upgrade energy transmission systems, district heating and to improve the energy efficiency of private and public infrastructures in the Western Balkans.
25. We recall our decision to open the EU's mechanism for joint **purchases of gas and LNG** for the Western Balkans and encourage its use by our partners having gas markets to reduce their dependency on Russian gas. Through the Energy Community, the **EU is also opening its electricity market** to the Western Balkans, subject to regulatory reforms.
26. 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 secure and resilient connectivity, energy transition and diversification of energy supplies. The support provided through the EIP comprises of EUR 9 billion in grant funding from IPA III and up to EUR 20 billion in investments for the period 2021-2027, and is in an advanced stage of implementation. Of the almost EUR 30 billion investment package for the region, EUR 16,6 billion has already been mobilised. 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.

## Reinforcing security and building resilience

27. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine poses fundamental security challenges. The EU remains determined to **further strengthen cooperation with the Western Balkans on core security and defence issues, including at operational level**. In this regard, we welcome the fact that partners have continued to prove their commitment to the **Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)**, including 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 remains committed to contribute to security in the region, including through its CSDP operation EUFOR Althea and its EULEX mission. The EU welcomes the partners' continued commitment to the development of effective instruments for **Western Balkans regional cooperation in the area of security and defence**. The EU has also started to further enhance its engagement with the region in fields such as addressing **hybrid and cyber threats, space and military mobility**.
28. The EU will continue to support the Western Balkans in fighting **Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)**, including disinformation as well as other hybrid threats that 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 **strategic communication** about EU-Western Balkans relations and the enlargement process in particular. The EU will also intensify its work with partners to counter false Russian narratives and disinformation about Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

29. **We will continue to enhance our collective cybersecurity in collaboration with the Western Balkans**, including through coordinated operational and technical support, and involvement of the region in EU cybersecurity mechanisms. Our reinforced joint efforts build on existing programmes and on cooperation with the EU Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), and the European Security and Defence College, combined with bilateral initiatives of EU Member States and other partners. Under the Cybersecurity Rapid Response project, worth EUR 2.6 million, EU action has focused on increasing the cyber resilience and cyber incident preparedness of partners. The IPA-funded EUR 5 million regional programme on Western Balkans cybersecurity capacity building is supporting the region's cyber resilience in the medium and long term. These programmes are complemented by TAIEX peer-to-peer assistance on a regular basis. We welcome the establishment of the Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre, which promotes regional cooperation in building cyber resilience. Increased cooperation of the Western Balkans with ENISA and the European Cyber Competence Centre and the facilitating role of the Regional Cooperation Council will be of growing importance going forward. The European Union looks forward to the establishment of the EU Cyber reserve, which will be available to the Western Balkans partners in order to respond to significant or large-scale cybersecurity incidents.

## **Irregular migration, fight against terrorism and organised crime**

30. **Migration management remains a key shared challenge and responsibility.** We acknowledge the progress made on the implementation of the EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans presented in December 2022. Thanks to coordinated action, the overall migratory pressure on the Western Balkan route has so far decreased in 2023 compared to 2022. However, the route is still very active with high numbers of detected irregular border crossings. In light of this, the EU and the Western Balkans remain determined to implement the EU Action Plan in full, including to combat smuggling of migrants and human trafficking, and to ensure access to international protection for those in need, and to strengthen further the monitoring of trends along the route. In this regard, Western Balkans partners are invited to further strengthen their involvement in the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT), the EU flagship instrument for fighting serious and organised crime. The significant EU financial support through dedicated programmes will allow partners to enhance asylum and reception systems, strengthen border protection, fight organised crime groups and other criminal networks, in particular those engaged in migrant smuggling and increase returns from the Western Balkans to the countries of origin.
31. People from the entire Western Balkans region will as of next year be able to travel visa free to the Schengen area. The EU welcomes progress made on alignment with **EU visa policy** by several Western Balkan partners and calls for further alignment to prevent abuse of EU Member States' migration and asylum systems. On readmission, the EU has welcomed efforts by partners to improve the implementation of existing Readmission Agreements between the EU and the Western Balkans. Partners must continue to enhance their return systems, including by concluding readmission agreements with key countries of origin. The EU's additional financial and technical support – facilitated through Frontex – is aimed at enhancing cooperation on returns and readmission with countries of origin. The EU welcomes the signing and conclusion of new Frontex Status Agreements with some of the partners and calls on other partners to follow suit swiftly. Cooperation should also be further intensified with the European Union Agency for Asylum and with Europol.

32. The EU calls for further strengthening **cooperation on counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism in all its forms**, including the prevention of radicalisation and of terrorist financing. The EU welcomes the results achieved throughout the five years of the implementation of the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans and confirms its resolve to continue cooperating in the future, also in view of emerging threats such as violent right-wing extremism, violent extremist content spreading online and possible attacks on critical infrastructure. The EU reiterates the importance of taking resolute action to address serious and organised crime, in particular **money laundering, high-level corruption, drug cultivation, production and trafficking**, through enhanced law enforcement and customs cooperation facilitated by EMPACT. In the context of devastating consequences of drug use and drug trafficking on the health and security of our societies, we agree to continue and intensify our joint efforts through an evidence-based, integrated, multidisciplinary and balanced approach.
33. The EU welcomes the Western Balkan partners' reconfirmed determination to eradicate the **trafficking and proliferation of small arms and light weapons** and high level of cooperation to tackle firearms smuggling within EMPACT. The EU will continue to support the Western Balkans in this field. The roadmap, which was prolonged beyond 2024, is an internationally recognised example of good practice of regional cooperation to strengthen small arms control.
34. The EU continues to encourage 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 Balkan partners, and we encourage the other partners to engage in similar cooperation as soon as possible.

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35. We welcome our Western Balkans partners' alignment with the above points.
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