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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee
Subject:	Preparation of the EU-Western Balkans Summit (Tirana, 6 December 2022)

Delegations will find below a draft declaration, distributed under the responsibility of the Cabinet of the President of the European Council, in light of the upcoming COREPER discussion on the EU-Western Balkans Summit of 6 December 2022.

[Draft]

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 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**.
3. The EU welcomes the Western Balkans Partners' **resolve to uphold core European values, principles and international norms**. 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 as well as their determination to **step up the implementation of necessary reforms** in the interest of their people. The EU and the Western Balkans Partners will work together to inform our citizens about the benefits of the bonds that bind us and our enduring cooperation.
4. Standing together with the EU is a clear sign of Partners' strategic orientation, now more than ever, as Russia escalates its war in Ukraine. A common vision of the future involves mutual responsibilities and shared values. As we deepen our cooperation with Partners, we reassert our expectation for them to align with the **EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and act accordingly, including on EU restrictive measures**. We commend those Western Balkans Partners that already demonstrate their strategic commitment in this regard by **fully aligning** with the EU CFSP.

5. The EU remains the region's **closest partner, main investor, trading partner and principal donor**. The exceptional scale and range of this support must be made more visible and reflected by the Partners in their **public debate** and **communication**, so that citizens can see the concrete benefits of the partnership with the EU.
6. Building on the revised methodology, the EU is determined to further advance the **gradual integration** of the region already during the enlargement process itself in a reversible and merit-based manner. We welcome the measures already taken in this regard, both in the context of the accession negotiations as well as the Stabilisation and Association Process.
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 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, 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. 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 **High Representative and the EU Special Representative** for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and expect concrete progress by the two Parties on the full normalisation of relations between them, which is critical for the stability and development of the whole region and to ensure that they can continue on their respective European paths.
10. The first meeting of the **European Political Community** (EPC) took place on 6 October 2022 in Prague, in which both the EU and Western Balkans, together with other partners, participated. The meeting provided a platform for political coordination and an opportunity for in-depth exchanges on pressing issues for the entire continent.

Tackling together the negative impact of Russia's war on 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 to the Western Balkans Partners in tackling the negative effects on their economies and societies.

12. 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 to 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 1.3 billion in investment grants under the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) for financing of 24 flagship investment projects with a total value of EUR 3.4 billion was approved in the first half 2022. A new package is already under preparation [has just been approved - TBC], 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 Mediterranean road corridor, the Orient-East-Med rail corridor and two cross-border bridges, Svilaj and Gradiška. Maximising the impact of the EIP also requires the Western Balkans Partners to strengthen the **rule of law** and to 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, the highest level of engagement on socio-economic matters between the EU and the Western Balkans partners. The further building of the Common Regional Market is also key.

13. The EU has developed a substantial new **Energy Support Package worth EUR 1 billion in grants that can bring EUR 2.5 billion investments to help the Western Balkans** mitigate the impact of the energy crisis. The Package is funded via IPA III and includes immediate, short and medium-term measures to provide help to citizens and businesses in the Western Balkans and to strengthen energy security in the region. From the Package EUR 500 million in grants will go for immediate support for vulnerable families and SMEs, and another EUR 500 million, also in grants, will be dedicated to investments in support of the energy transition and independence: boosting gas and electricity interconnectors including LNG as well as by supporting the construction of renewable energy projects and the energy efficiency measures, upgrade of energy transmission systems, district heating and schemes for energy efficiency for the old blocks-of-flats.
14. We recall our decision to open the **common purchases of gas, LNG and hydrogen** for 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** to the Western Balkans, subject to regulatory reforms.
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 - a key driver for the transition to modern, carbon-neutral, climate-resilient and resource-efficient economies - aimed to unlock the potential of circular economy, fight against pollution and improve waste management.
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 IPARD III**, respectively. For the latter, the EU contribution of EUR 560 million for the coming seven-year period has already been adopted this year.

Reinforcing security and building resilience against foreign interference

17. The EU and the Western Balkans share a **number of security challenges** that demand coordinated action, which in the context of Russia's war on Ukraine has become even more important. 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 their 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 further enhance its engagement also in fields such as **space** and **military mobility**.
18. The EU and the Western Balkans will further reinforce our cooperation to **address foreign information manipulation and interference**, including disinformation as well as other hybrid threats that target Western Balkans societies and seek to undermine the region's EU perspective. We will further strengthen our cooperation **to build resilience** to information manipulation, including disinformation, and increase the impact of our **strategic communication** about EU - Western Balkans relations and the enlargement process in particular.
19. As cyber threats know no borders, we will work together to enhance our collective cyber security. Recent large scale cyber-attacks indicate a need for enhanced engagement, building on existing programmes as well as cooperation with the EU Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) and with CERT-EU, combined with bilateral initiatives of EU Member States and other partners. Under the Cybersecurity Rapid Response, EU action is focusing on increasing cyber resilience and cyber incident preparedness in Partners targeted by recent attacks, with longer-term region-wide EU cyber support starting in 2023. The EU will continue to step up its support to the resilience against cyber-attacks in the Western Balkans, in cooperation with international partners.

Intensifying political and policy engagement

20. The EU and the Western Balkans are determined to accelerate and deepen our political and policy engagement, including the participation of Western Balkans Partners in high-level EU events and meetings and regular CFSP dialogues. Western Balkans Partners have been invited to provide input to the Foreign Affairs Council meetings already, and receive debriefs by the European External Action Service thereafter. Western Balkans Partners have also been invited to participate in informal Energy Council meetings. This enhanced engagement reflects the EU's commitment to the region and its well-being.
21. The EU and the Western Balkans leaders will further **deepen their sectoral collaboration** in areas of common interest, such as justice and home affairs, the economy and the EU Single 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 cyber and counter-terrorism.
22. The EU and the Western Balkans reconfirm their commitment to step up efforts to enhance the market **integration of the Western Balkans with the EU Single Market**. The Western Balkans' Common Regional Market (CRM) should serve as a stepping stone for this 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. Further decisive efforts by all Western Balkans leaders are needed to 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.

23. 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 is ready to support further work towards the establishment of cross-border instant Euro payments as a first step towards integration into the Single European Payments Area.
24. 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 to create further opportunities for the **youth**. The European Universities Initiative opens the possibility for higher education institutions from the Western Balkans to participate in ambitious transnational alliances and to develop long-term structural and strategic cooperation. The **Youth Guarantee** put in action in the Western Balkans will contribute to reducing the brain drain experienced by the region.
25. In the **digital domain**, building on the successful implementation of the Regional Roadmap Agreement "Roam like at Home" from July 2021 on the elimination of roaming costs within the region, we welcome EU and the Western Balkans' telecom operators' joint declaration [of today] which will allow for the first **reduction of roaming costs between the EU and the Western Balkans in 2023**. 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.
26. We also welcome the progress in the extension and implementation of **EU-Western Balkans Green Lanes** and call for their application at all relevant borders. We furthermore welcome the establishment of 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 European Union and its Member States can bring.

Migration management, fight against terrorism, combatting organised crime

27. **Migration management is a joint challenge**, which the EU and the Western Balkans will address together, in close partnership. To this purpose, the EU has substantially increased its financial support to the region with over EUR 170 million of bilateral and regional assistance provided already to date under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) III.
28. While we commend our Partners for their efforts and constructive **cooperation** to date, sustained and expanded efforts are required to address irregular migration, including combatting smuggling and trafficking in human beings. 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. Given the increased migratory pressure in the region, our joined-up action, including strong financial support by the EU through dedicated programmes, focuses on strengthening border protection, fighting smuggling networks and organised crime groups, and stepping up returns from the Western Balkans to the countries of origin.
29. Partners' swift alignment with the **EU visa policy** is of crucial importance 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 the conclusion of readmission agreements with key countries of origin. 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 Asylum Support Office and Europol.

30. We call for further strengthening **cooperation on counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism**, including the prevention of radicalisation and of the financing of terrorism. 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, and will further support the Western Balkans in this field.

32. [We welcome that our Western Balkans Partners align themselves with the above points.]
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