

Chair's Conclusions

The Sofia Summit, as the main event of the 2020 Berlin Process Joint Chairmanship by the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia, builds on the previous Summits (Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Trieste, London and Poznan) in reaffirming the Berlin Process' importance as a catalyst for high-level cooperation between the Western Balkans and their EU peers participating in Berlin Process, in the light of their European integration prospects.

The Leaders agreed that the idea of a Joint Chairmanship, a pattern for the first time employed within the framework of the Berlin Process, envisaging a Co-Chairmanship by an EU member state and an EU candidate country from the Western Balkan region represents a clear signal of a strengthened regional ownership and adds to the efforts aiming at enhanced political and socio-economic convergence and cohesion with the EU.

The Leaders expressed their concerns about the unpredictability and increased pace of COVID-19 and its negative impact over the regional economies, public health, and human security. They praised the Joint Chairmanship's timely adaptations to the existing circumstances, designing an agenda that fits its purpose, while corresponding to the imposed realities.

The Leaders underlined the importance of regional cooperation and pledged their continuous support to different collaborative initiatives and mechanisms to boost the regional potential for strengthening the economy, people-to-people contacts and good neighbourly relations. They agreed that regional cooperation remains an important factor on the way to EU membership, not its substitute, reconfirming the longstanding view that the future of the entire region lies within the EU.

The Leaders commended the European Commission's (EC) Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans accompanied by a Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, which are intended to spur the long-term economic recovery of the region building on Green and Digital transition through a substantial investment package leading to sustained economic growth, implementation of reforms required to move forward on the EU path, and bringing the Western Balkans closer to the EU Single Market. They also welcomed that the Commission aims to mobilize up to €9 billion of grant funding under the future Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) to support the socio-economic convergence of the region with the EU. It will be complemented by the new Western Balkans Guarantee facility, which should be raising investments of up to at least € 20 billion. This process should be done through integrity compliance with EU standards and reliable project implementation process.

The leaders welcomed the new package of connectivity projects presented by the EC under the Western Balkans Investment Framework. It constitutes the first step in the implementation of the flagship projects of the Economic and Investment Plan, while at the same time completes the delivery of the EU's 2015 pledge to deliver €1 billion in support of connectivity in the region. The leaders acknowledged that sustainable mobility for people and freight, multi-modal mobility solutions, as well as reform measures to ensure best value from modernised transport infrastructure, is important for regional cooperation and integration.

Building on the deliberations of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs at their meetings held on March 10 in Skopje and virtually on November 9, 2020, as well as of the meetings of the Ministers of Interior, of Health, of Economy, of Information Society, on Roma issues, held during October and early November all held also in an online format, the Leaders of the Western Balkans renewed their sustained commitment to adhere and promote the core European values: democracy, rule of law, fundamental rights, which also provide transformative incentive, and are engines of economic integration and the essential anchor for fostering regional reconciliation and durable stability.

Common Regional Market

In the spirit of regional cooperation, the Leaders of the Western Balkans agreed on the Declaration on Common Regional Market (CRM) - *A catalyst for deeper regional economic integration and a stepping stone towards EU Single Market* and adopted an Action Plan for the period 2021-2024, which is based on the EU four freedoms and enriched with digital, investment, innovation, and industry areas. While welcoming the achievements obtained in the implementation of Multi-Annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area (MAP REA), the Leaders acknowledged the necessity to deepen economic cooperation with the EU amidst the post-pandemic recovery efforts.

MAP CRM will be a cornerstone document and a vision reflecting regional economic interests, enhancing economic cooperation in the region by developing Common Regional Market, based on EU rules and standards. Emphasizing the role of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) in its development and future monitoring, the Leaders agreed that the implementation of the Plan will contribute to significantly reduce the distance to EU markets, while leading to a more attractive and competitive region.

The Western Balkan Leaders pledged their full support to the Common Regional Market, while underscoring the importance of investments in the productive sectors and sustainable infrastructure envisioned by the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans recently published by the European Commission. The complementarity of these two documents will pave the way to a deeper economic integration of the region with the EU single market and speed up the economic convergence with the EU. To this end, the Western Balkans expressed support to regional initiatives aiming at strengthening political and socio-economic convergence, reaffirming the principle of all-inclusiveness.

Green agenda for Western Balkans

The Western Balkan Leaders welcomed the Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans accompanying the Economic and Investment Plan launched by the European Commission in October 2020, that show readiness and a clear commitment of the EU to supporting the Western Balkan region in its endeavours for a comprehensive overhaul towards modern, resource efficient, competitive and climate neutral economies, where economic growth is decoupled from resource use and greenhouse gas emissions. This process should turn a new page in the economic development of the Region, address the main environmental and health challenges, and offer a new blueprint for action and huge potential for growth and creation of new jobs.

Expressing their own readiness to take decisive measures and swiftly and resolutely align with the relevant EU policies setting the flagship goal of achieving climate-neutrality by mid-century, the Western Balkan Leaders endorsed the Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans expressing gratitude to the Regional Cooperation Council for coordinating its preparation.

The Declaration aims at unlocking the economic potential of the green, low-carbon, and circular economy and at addressing and curbing the main drivers of climate change. Through its five pillars, the Declaration strives to support transformation of the energy, transport and agriculture sectors, enhance resilience to the impacts of climate change, facilitate transition from linear to circular economy, strengthen efforts on de-pollution and intensify activities on nature and ecosystems protection including halting biodiversity loss. By this Declaration, the Western Balkan Leaders recognized the importance of the regional cooperation and confirmed their determination to work towards improving the well-being of Western Balkan citizens through joining the EU's efforts in fighting climate change.

Regional Agreement for Free Movement with ID Cards

The Leaders welcomed the Chair's Conclusions of the Berlin Process Meeting of Ministers of Interior held in Skopje on October 16. Removing remaining barriers to the free movement of people is an important dimension of the Common Regional Market.

They supported the initiative for signing a Regional Agreement for free movement with ID cards as an opportunity for a closer and better-connected region and acknowledged the role of the RCC as a facilitator of this process. They reiterated the Minister's call upon all parties for an effective engagement to swiftly finalise this process.

Regional Response to COVID19-related Challenges

The Leaders commended the decision of the Co-Chairs to organise for the first time in the framework of the Berlin Process a meeting of Ministers of Health, which took place in Skopje on October 22, 2020, thus fostering the efforts for a streamlined and coordinated regional approach in tackling the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Leaders welcomed the Chair's Conclusions of the Berlin Process Meeting of Ministers of Health and supported a reinforced regional health response in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. They agreed that in the medium and long-term, regionally, and internationally coordinated policies and measures can faster facilitate socioeconomic recovery and help better prepare for the future risks and pandemics. The Leaders commended the EU solidarity with the region in fighting the pandemic, demonstrated by the unmatched support for the region totalling 3.3 billion Euros announced on April 29. At the same time, they reiterated the Ministers' call for continuation of EU's, WHO's and other international organizations' support for the Western Balkans in fight against the pandemic and minimizing its impact on their health systems, economies and societies.

Related to COVID-19, but also to other threats and challenges of different natures and origins, the Joint Chairmanship held a VTC workshop on September 18 in Sofia, dedicated to Risk Monitoring, Risk Prevention and Forecast Simulation modelling and dealing with specific innovative approaches applicable to various EU policies. The Leaders took note of the discussions at the Workshop and the importance of coordinated risk management response.

Extension of the WB6 Green Corridors/Lanes Initiative to the EU

The Leaders echoed the Ministers of Economy recognition of the achievements realized through the Green Corridors to minimise the devastating COVID-19 effects. The corridors played valuable role for unimpeded regional trade flow, providing the region with basic medical and food supplies without bottlenecks in the transit of goods.

The Leaders welcomed the current region-driven Green Corridors/Lanes Initiative and the work of CEFTA, RCC and the Transport Community in facilitating this process. With the successful establishment of "green lanes" within the region, inclusive regional cooperation was shown at its best.

The Leaders supported the Joint Chairmanship's Initiative to promote the proposal for a WB6 Green Corridors/Lanes extension to the EU, and acknowledged its potential to have an important positive impact on the economic recovery of the WB and to further mitigate severe economic consequences of the pandemic. The Leaders called on all relevant stakeholders to further explore the proposal, to ensure wide consensus and adequate political decisions for the way forward. This initiative is also reflected in the Common Regional Market action plan.

Digital Transformation

The 3rd Western Balkan Digital Summit, a flagship event of the regional economic integration agenda, was held 26-28 October, followed by a Ministerial meeting on 2 November 2020 to build upon the achievements from the last Digital Summit and commit to new challenges ahead. Acknowledging the

progress in roaming charges reduction, Western Balkan Leaders committed *to duly and efficiently establish roaming-free region by 1 July 2021*. They welcomed the signing of the *Memorandum of Understanding on regional interoperability and trust services in the Western Balkans Region* and the *Memorandum of Understanding on 5G Roadmap for the digital transformation of the Western Balkans region*, based on EU standards and mirroring the best practices in EU.

Recognizing the transformational potential digitalization would bring to the region, with the development of a regional digital area being a key element of the Common Regional Market, the Western Balkan Leaders committed to investing their best efforts to deliver on all agendas in an inclusive and transparent manner aiming to integrate into the pan-European digital area, roaming, 5G, cybersecurity, innovations, interoperability, trust services, e-government and e-health.

The Leaders also committed to integrating the Western Balkans into the pan-European digital market and transforming the industrial sectors, shaping regional value chains, and integrating them into EU value chains; and to an inclusive regional cooperation in order to become fully-fledged participants in the EU policies, programmes and the Single Market, aligning further with EU-compliant rules and standards and expanding opportunities for companies and citizens.

Roma Integration

Building on the Declaration of Western Balkans Partners on Roma Integration within the EU Enlargement Process, endorsed last year in Poznan, the Leaders acknowledged the need for a joint commitment to step up the efforts in integrating the Roma population, as one of the most vulnerable groups in the region. The Western Balkan Leaders welcomed the conclusions of the Ministerial meeting on Roma Integration held in Tirana on 27 October 2020. It was co-organized by the Government of Albania and the Regional Cooperation Council, with the purpose to discuss the progress made in achieving the objectives set forth in the Declaration and determine the path towards further joint regional actions for improving the situation of Roma.

While welcoming the achievements so far, the Leaders acknowledged the high necessity for data collection on the socio-economic status of Roma, which must be dealt with according to EU standards. The Leaders also reaffirmed that certain processes must be accelerated for achieving greater results, in particular related to improving the housing situation of Roma by mapping informal settlements, as well as developing roadmaps for the purpose of ending statelessness among Roma. Finally, the Leaders welcomed the related aspects of the EC Economic and Investment Plan for the WB, which recognizes the need to improve the access to education and labor market for Roma, measures which will be dealt with in the upcoming period, while taking into consideration the Roma responsive budgeting guidelines and principles.

The Leaders agreed to continue assessing the progress of implementation of the Declaration targets at the next Leaders' Summit.

Youth and Youth-Related Policies

The Leaders reemphasized the critical role of young people for the prosperity of the whole region. While remaining concerned of the reinforced pace of brain drain and scarcity of opportunities for young people in the region, the Leaders commended the decision of the Joint Chairmanship to treat youth-related issues and policies as a horizontal dimension of its priority agenda.

The Leaders agreed that there is a growing need for a structured approach in tackling the brain drain issue and a necessity for greater engagement and involvement of young people in policymaking. Targeted policymaking is needed to reflect young people's needs and interests, providing favourable grounds and incentives for keeping young minds and talents in the region. The Leaders commended the work of RYCO and underscored that the organization is an important regional stakeholder promoting

educational, cultural, and other positive relevant exchanges as well as reconciliation and good neighbourly relations. The Leaders reaffirmed their support for RYCO.

The Leaders also welcomed the Agenda for the Western Balkans on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (“Innovation Agenda for the Western Balkans”)

announced by the European Commission, which should serve as comprehensive, long-term strategy for cooperation in these fields with the Western Balkans. It will be essential for enhancing human capital development, stopping brain drain and encouraging brain circulation, as well as fostering the development of a long-term sustainable innovation ecosystem and the transition to a knowledge-based economy. It will lay the foundations for evidence-based policymaking and promote inclusive and high-quality education and training systems, thus providing better perspectives for the young people in the region.

They also welcomed the Youth Guarantee, instrument which should be implemented by Western Balkan governments in line with the EU Youth Guarantee.

Think Tank and Civil Society

Building on the previous patterns, especially in the light of the last year’s exchange in Poznan, the Leaders welcomed the continuous structured approached and reinforced exchange between policymakers and representatives of think-tank and civil society community. The Leaders commended the Joint Chairmanship approach in motivating a structured dialogue between the stakeholders, while taking note of views and insights by the think-tankers and civil society representatives.

The Leaders applauded the structured interaction that took place at the meetings of Ministers of Foreign Affairs held on March 10 in Skopje and on November 9 in Sofia. Despite the extraordinary circumstances, the Leaders welcomed the decision to have a Civil Society Forum that was held in online format and took note of the discussions and exchanged views; and further committed to the support of think-tank and civil society communities in providing policy solutions in the light of the European integration of the region.

Education, Science, Research, and Innovation

The Leaders take note that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the physical meeting of the Berlin Process Joint Science Conference planned to take place this year in Warsaw (Poland) has been postponed to 2021. They support the national academies, universities, and research organizations to continue their common work within the Berlin Process Joint Science Conference.

Furthermore, the parties underline the necessity to use scientific advice and evidence from research both in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic and for the post-pandemic recovery in the Western Balkans. For this, national mechanisms of scientific advice are essential, as already recommended by the Berlin Process Joint Science Conference in 2019. Such mechanisms or structures shall proactively pursue international and regional collaboration.

The Leaders welcome the introduction of the “Agenda for the Western Balkans on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport” in the Commission Communication entitled “An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans”. Progress in these sectors is essential for the European path of the Western Balkans and for better regional cooperation in South East Europe. They would welcome the Western Balkans Research Fund to be integrated into the “Innovation Agenda for the Western Balkans”, as a targeted measure for Brain Gain towards the Western Balkans and EU-Western Balkans Brain Circulation.

Delivering on Multiannual Action Plan for Regional Economic Area

Following up on the commitments of the Multi-Annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area, the *Protocol on Open Access to Research Infrastructures in the Western Balkans* has been

endorsed, with the aim to encourage mobility of researchers and scientific collaboration in the region. The Protocol is going to enable, inter alia, the establishment of the Network of Open Research Infrastructures in the Western Balkans by the end of 2020 and foster regional cooperation among various stakeholders and contribute to the overall economic development.

In addition, the Western Balkans economies endorsed the *Regionally accepted standards for negotiation of International Investment Agreements (IIAs)* as guidance for negotiating or re-negotiating IIAs to promote regional economic integration efforts, bringing the region closer to the alignment with the EU standards through the creation of dynamic regional investment area.

Future of the Berlin Process

The Joint Chairmanship has shown that bestowing of ownership of the process could produce more regionally driven response to concrete needs and interests. The Berlin Process remains an instrument aiming at regional cohesion, while also providing convergence with the EU single market. While on the one hand aiming to further promote good-neighbourliness, it is an accelerator of regional connectivity and various collaborative processes, facilitating the overcoming of the existing disparities, and contributing towards convergence between Western Balkans and the EU MS. Aiming at concrete projects and initiatives, it has systematically served as a platform supporting the regional course of action in the light of European integration. This is the added value of the Berlin Process, which besides the project-related activities aiming at improving the quality of life of the citizens in the Western Balkans, facilitates a structured dialogue leading to important political and socioeconomic processes that should continue in the future under the EU's overarching umbrella.

The Berlin Process has been an efficient instrument to raise and solve bilateral issues, while constructively supporting and promoting process of reconciliation in the region. This has been done with determination to focus on the future while making sure our future will have solid foundations. In this sense, the leaders commend and expect full respect and implementation of pledges made by all signatories of the Joint Declaration on Regional Cooperation and Good Neighborly Relations in the Framework of the Berlin Process; Joint Declaration on Missing Persons in the Framework of the Berlin Process; and Joint Declaration on War Crimes in the Framework of the Berlin Process, adopted on 10 July 2018 in London.

The Joint Chairmanship commends the vision of Chancellor Merkel and the German stewardship of this process. As a multi-stakeholder initiative, it brings together different interested parties adding quality to the regional cooperation. This approach is much needed, especially in the context of COVID-19 and its long-term repercussions over the regional economies. The Joint Chairmanship also underscores the role of the EU/EC, as well as the regional organisations, such as RCC, CEFTA, TC, RYCO, WBF and others for their contribution to this process and moreover to the fulfilment of the overall mission and priorities of the Berlin Process.

The Leaders welcomed the invitation by Chancellor Merkel for a next Summit in Berlin in 2021.