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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Permanent Representatives' Committee
Subject:	EU-Western Balkans Summit (Slovenia, 6 October 2021) – Orientation debate

In view of the orientation debate of the Permanent representatives' Committee on 7 July 2021 delegations will find in annex a note issued under the responsibility of the Cabinet of the President of the European Council.

EU-Western Balkans Summit (Slovenia, 6 October 2021)**Coreper Orientation Note****A. CONTEXT**

1. The EU-Western Balkans Summit in Slovenia on 6 October 2021 is part of the implementation of the 2019-2024 Strategic Agenda and follows the Sofia Summit in 2018 and the Zagreb Summit in 2020. It will be hosted by the Slovenian Presidency and chaired by the President of the European Council who, together with the President of the European Commission, will represent the EU.
2. The Summit comes at an important moment for EU-Western Balkans relations. The EU remains committed to the European perspective of the region and has provided unprecedented levels of EU support - including to address the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, there is a call from Western Balkan Partners to further strengthen the EU's engagement and visibility, alongside Partners' renewed engagement to undertake reforms to which they have committed. The pandemic has accelerated existing geopolitical trends and challenges, highlighting the necessity of a close and effective partnership between the EU and the Western Balkans. In this context, the EU has been supporting Partners to address their immediate health needs, including access to vaccines, mitigate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, and is assisting its post-pandemic green and digital recovery through the Economic and Investment Plan, which aims at closing the socio-economic gap between the region and the EU through investments in sustainable transport and energy, decarbonisation, digital technologies, support to the business sector, developing human capital, and fostering close economic integration of the region.

For the EU, the Summit is also a timely opportunity to reconfirm its unequivocal commitment to the European perspective of the Western Balkans and to demonstrate its unwavering engagement with the region. For the Partners, the Summit allows to reaffirm their commitment to European values and a shared vision of our European future, to pursue necessary reforms with renewed vigour. It is important also to address remaining sources of instability and socio-political challenges, including further and meaningful efforts to resolve bilateral disputes and to enhance regional cooperation.

The EU is the region's closest partner, main investor, trading partner and principal donor by a long measure. The EU needs to ensure the visibility of its efforts so that these are fully recognised. In this regard, it is equally important for our Partners to reflect the scale of EU support and solidarity in their public debate and communication. Common effort is required to address the increasing activities of some external actors, who pursue interests at the expense of those of both the EU and Partners.

B. SUMMIT OBJECTIVES

3. The main objectives of the Summit should be the following:

- **EU to reaffirm its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans, and partners to recommit to EU values and reforms, while working with each other and with EU Member States in a spirit of cooperation and good-neighbourliness.**

The 2020 Zagreb Summit Declaration, 2018 Sofia Summit Declaration and previous Council conclusions¹, reaffirm the EU's unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans. At the same time, a common vision of the future entails a shared responsibility. Given that the Western Balkans' future lies in the EU, a modality should be found to ensure that the inputs of the region are brought to the Summit. Moreover, the EU needs to deliver and strengthen its credibility in the region.

¹ Council conclusions of June 2019 endorsed by the European Council, doc. 10446/19 + COR

The EU expects partners to use the Summit to reaffirm and reinforce their joint and individual commitment to uphold European core values and principles; to take ownership and demonstrate their political will through the vigorous pursuit of necessary reforms in the interest of their people - notably in the key area of rule of law; to enhance CFSP alignment; to recommit to regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations; and, to devote decisive efforts to foster reconciliation and find lasting solutions to bilateral disputes.

- **Further intensify the EU's engagement in the region, building on the substantial Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) and on other concrete deliverables.**

Following the Zagreb Summit, the Commission put forward the Economic and Investment Plan and guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans,² to spur the long-term economic recovery of the region, support a green and digital transition and foster regional integration and convergence with the EU. The Plan, which envisages a substantial investment package³ of up to €28 billion in grants, guarantees and preferential loans, and aims to increase the region's competitiveness through sustainable transport and energy connectivity, to unleash its economic potential and to expand the scope for regional economic cooperation and trade. On this basis, the Summit provides the EU with the opportunity to dynamise its engagement and support for the region's political, economic and social transformation, based on tangible progress on the rule of law and on socio-economic reforms.

The EIP also enables a new momentum to enhance connectivity in all its dimensions, both within the Western Balkans and with the EU. Inclusive regional cooperation based on EU rules and standards, in particular the Western Balkans Common Regional Market, would unleash intra-regional trade and attract investments.

² Commission Communication “ An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans” of 6 October 2020 COM(2020) 641

³ Up to €9 billion in IPA III funding, with the possibility of leveraging a further €20 billion in investments through the Western Balkans Guarantee Facility.

Other deliverables, which could include progress on e.g. roaming, Green Lanes, cooperation in cyber-security, will be determined in the run-up to the summit. The potential of shortening supply chains to Europe via the Western Balkans should also be explored.

The EU will further advance political dialogue with regional partners on CFSP-related issues and is working on reinforcing engagement, cooperation and partnership with the Western Balkans in multilateral fora.

- **Continue and enhance support to the region to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects, particularly by the delivery of vaccines.**

The COVID-19 crisis continues to have a severe impact on our societies and economies. The pandemic has demonstrated the importance of standing united to tackle common challenges. The EU, together with its Member States, has stood by the Western Balkans throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, with health and economic support totalling an unprecedented €3.3 billion for the region so far. This includes: €41.46 million for immediate support to the health sector and to procure medical equipment; over €70 million for access to COVID-19 vaccines and implementation of vaccination campaigns; €7.35 million to assist in vaccine preparedness; over €2 billion to support businesses and public sector investment; as well as over €1 billion in socio-economic support and macro-financial assistance. Western Balkans partners were closely involved in EU coordination initiatives, notably the EU Health Security Committee, the Early Warning System, the Green Corridors and the Joint Procurement Agreement for medical countermeasures. **This cooperation and coordination, particularly for the supply of COVID-19 vaccines for the Western Balkans, needs to be taken forward.** To this end, the Summit offers an important opportunity for the EU to support the vaccination plans of the Partners in the region with a view to reaching similar vaccination rates to those of the EU by the end of 2021. Team Europe is the tangible expression of the European resolve to express our global solidarity. The Summit is also a key moment to address how access to COVID-19 tools such as vaccines, diagnostics, therapeutics can be improved in the future, to ensure more predictability and resilience.

The region is also dependent on tourism from the EU and travel to the EU of the considerable diaspora. Its swift inclusion in travel facilitation measures, such as adequacy decisions of the digital COVID certificate, would be highly beneficial.

C. PROPOSED OUTCOMES AND DELIVERABLES

The Summit should conclude with an outcome document, in the form of an EU Declaration with which the Partners will be invited to align. The outcome document should contain concrete deliverables proposed by the Commission, largely on the basis of the Economic and Investment Plan. The outcome document should also contain concrete initiatives to increase EU pandemic support for the region, with a concrete pledge on vaccines.

D. PROPOSED SUMMIT AGENDA / PROGRAMME / PRACTICAL ORGANISATION

The EU-Western Balkans Summit will consist of a plenary session, with the participation of a limited number of external stakeholders. The session would focus on the development of cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans through the Economic and Investment Plan and COVID-19 support. The Summit will be completed by a Leaders' working lunch, where an open discussion should take place. A press conference will follow.

4. The practical organisation of the Summit will respect status-neutrality.

E. PREPARATIONS

5. COREPER is invited to discuss preparations for the Summit on the basis of this note, and to endorse the main lines it sets out.
6. Thereafter, COREPER will take forward the preparatory work on the draft outcome document and on deliverables.

7. A strategic communication campaign to promote EU's values and objectives and counter disinformation activities will be developed for the preparation and conduct of the Summit. The strategic communication campaign should maximise positive narratives and underscore the EU's unprecedented support provided to the region, both in the context of the pandemic and of the EIP: support far beyond what has been provided by any other actor. It should be deployed both in the region, as well as in EU member states, to draw the attention of the European public on the importance the Western Balkans region.
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