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NOTE

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

In view of the orientation debate of the Permanent representatives' Committee on 4 November 2022 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 (Tirana, 6 December 2022)**Coreper Orientation Note****A. CONTEXT**

1. The EU-Western Balkans Summit in **Tirana on 6 December 2022** is part of the implementation of the 2019-2024 Strategic Agenda and follows the Sofia Summit in 2018, the Zagreb Summit in 2020 and the Brdo Summit in 2021, where it was decided to hold regular EU-Western Balkans Summits. The Summit will gather Members of the European Council and leaders of the six Western Balkans Partners. It will be chaired by the President of the European Council.
2. The Summit will be **hosted for the first time in the region** by one of the Western Balkans Partners. With Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine impacting the security of the entire European continent, the strategic partnership between the EU and the Western Balkans region is more important than ever. Standing together with the EU is a clear sign of our Partners' strategic orientation.
3. The **European Union is committed to supporting the Western Balkans Partners in a timely manner in addressing the negative effects of the war** and strengthening their resilience. **Russia's weaponisation of energy, food, and information** affects the Western Balkans Partners too, targeting those who fully align with EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and its restrictive measures in particular. The EU-Western Balkans Summit is an opportunity to join forces to counter hybrid threats, including disinformation and other malign interference.
4. The EU is the Western Balkans region's closest partner, its main investor and trading partner, and its principal donor. The EU and its Western Balkans Partners will work together to inform the citizens about the benefits of our long-standing partnership and cooperation.

5. The June 2022 European Council expressed its full and unequivocal commitment to the EU membership perspective of the Western Balkans and called for the acceleration of the accession process. It invited the Commission, the High Representative and the Council to further advance the **gradual integration** between the EU and the region already during the enlargement process itself in a reversible and merit-based manner. Some measures have already been taken in this regard, in line with the revised enlargement methodology as well as with the stabilisation and association process.

B. SUMMIT OBJECTIVES

6. The main objectives of the Summit will be the following:
- *To reaffirm the EU membership perspective of the Western Balkans, on the one hand, and the corresponding commitment of Partners to EU values, reforms and alignment with EU policies, on the other.*

The current geopolitical context has made it imperative for the EU to once again confirm its commitment to the enlargement process. At the Summit, the region's strategic importance for the EU will be demonstrated in concrete terms.

A common vision of the future involves mutual responsibilities and shared values. The EU expects the Western Balkans to commit to upholding core **European values and principles, to align with EU policies and decisions, and to denounce Russia's aggression on Ukraine as a gross violation of international law** that endangers global peace and security.

The EU accession process is premised on Partners taking **ownership** and delivering on the **necessary reforms** - notably in the key area of **rule of law** and in particular those related to the independence and functioning of the judiciary and fight against corruption.

Regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations are essential, and the EU expects Partners to foster reconciliation and find lasting solutions to regional and bilateral disputes and issues rooted in the legacy of the past. It also calls on Partners to guarantee the rights and equal treatment of persons belonging to minorities.

- ***To further deepen the political and policy partnership between the EU and the Western Balkans and help mitigate the negative impact of Russia's war of aggression on the Western Balkans.***

The EU's political engagement with the Western Balkans, especially in the current **context of Russia's war on Ukraine, is accelerating and deepening**, as highlighted by the EU-Western Balkans Leaders' meeting of 23 June 2022. The EU is progressively deepening its **policy engagement** with the Western Balkans, focusing on areas of joint interest, such as justice and home affairs, the economy and the single market, energy, transport and digital policy, civil protection, social policy, education and research and innovation, as well as foreign affairs, security and defence including cyber and counter-terrorism. This strengthened engagement is sending an important signal of EU's commitment to the region and its well-being. The first meeting of the European Political Community on 6 October 2022 in Prague in which both the EU and the Western Balkans Partners participated, provided an opportunity for in depth exchanges on pressing issues for the entire continent.

C. PROPOSED OUTCOMES AND DELIVERABLES

7. The Summit will conclude with an **outcome document, in the form of an EU Declaration** with which the Partners will be invited to align. The outcome document will contain concrete deliverables to be delivered by the Commission and the High Representative.

8. The main Summit deliverables will be grouped under the following headings:

- i. **Further implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) as well as the Green and Digital Agendas for the Western Balkans.** This includes further support to connectivity, energy transition and diversification of energy supplies in the region. 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 3.3 billion was approved in 2022. A new package is already under preparation, while adopted projects are entering the implementation stage. In the past year, work continued on all connectivity investments 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 potential impact of the EIP also requires the Western Balkans Partners to decisively undertake economic and social reforms as well as to strengthen the rule of law.
- ii. **A major new Energy Support Package worth EUR 1 billion in grants to help the Western Balkans mitigate the impact of the energy crisis** is currently being prepared by the Commission. The package will be funded via IPA III and will include immediate, short and medium-term measures to provide help to citizens and businesses in the Western Balkans and to ensure secure energy supplies in the region. Half of the Package will go for immediate support for vulnerable families and SMEs and half will be - as part of the EIP implementation - dedicated to investments for energy independence, to improve energy connections, energy efficiency and increase renewable energy sources among others.

The decision of EU leaders during the March 2022 European Council to **open the common purchases** of gas, LNG and hydrogen for Western Balkan Partners has been widely welcomed in the region. The **REPowerEU 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.

- iii. **Migration management:** Sustained and improved cooperation with the Partners to address the challenge of irregular migration, including combatting migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings. This is done in partnership approach, to be further strengthened with the newly presented Commission package of increased support for border and migration management. Alignment of Partners with EU visa policy is essential.
- iv. **Security cooperation and building resilience:** Shared security challenges necessitate coordinated action. Partners have proven their commitment by aligning with the EU's CFSP and to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) by contributing to different EU missions and operations. The EU and the region will work together to further develop their capabilities and capacities, notably through the European Peace Facility.

Also in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the EU and the Western Balkans will **reinforce** their cooperation to **address disinformation and other hybrid threats**. The cooperation needs to be strengthened in order to build resilience and increase the impact of our strategic communication. Recent grand scale cyber-attacks indicate a need for enhanced EU engagement on cyber security, building on existing programmes.

- v. **Further promotion of inclusive regional cooperation** based on EU rules and standards, in particular the Western Balkans Common Regional Market. This is a stepping stone for Partners' integration into the EU Single Market, as well as a means to maximise Partners' benefits from the EIP. While stimulating intra-regional **trade and mobility** and attracting investments, regional cooperation is also key to fostering resilience, economic growth and reconciliation. Encouraging the Partners to step up their efforts and deliver on their joint commitment and resolve the issues hampering the implementation of the Common Regional Market is of key importance.

- vi. **Food security:** The Western Balkans have been included in the European Food Security Crisis Preparedness and Response Mechanism to coordinate food security. The EU will continue its support to the agricultural sector under IPA III and IPARD III. For the latter, the EU contribution of EUR 560 million for the seven-year period was adopted in 2022.
- vii. In the **digital domain**, the EU continues to support the region's digital transformation. The Partners have signed up to the Declaration for the Future of Internet and are also fully associated to the work of the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications. European Commission and the Regional Cooperation Council are currently supporting key EU telecom operators to agree a joint declaration for gradual reduction of roaming charges between the EU and the Western Balkans starting from 2023. The summit could welcome the signature of a declaration by the telecom operators which would build on the regional roaming agreement 'Roam like at Home' that entered into force on 1 July 2021 and eliminated all roaming costs within the Western Balkans.
- viii. Progress on the extension of **green lanes** between the EU and the region.
- ix. Creating further opportunities for the **youth**, for example with the European universities initiative for ambitious transnational alliances of higher education institutions developing long-term structural and strategic cooperation opening to the Western Balkans Partners (with a call for proposals ongoing until the end of January 2023). Western Balkans agenda on innovation, research, education, culture, youth and sport is being implemented across the board and the region is gradually associated to EU programmes such as Erasmus+ - that offers mobility and cooperation opportunities in higher, vocational, school and adult education - and European Solidarity Corps. In addition, Youth guarantee in the Western Balkans is being put in action and should contribute to reducing the brain drain experienced by the region.
- x. Further efforts to find lasting solutions to **bilateral disputes** and issues rooted in the **legacy of the past** and towards guaranteeing the rights and equal treatment of persons belonging to minorities.

- xi. **Explore areas for further gradual integration** between the EU and the Western Balkans - in line with the revised enlargement methodology and the stabilisation and association process.

D. PROPOSED SUMMIT AGENDA / PROGRAMME / PRACTICAL ORGANISATION

9. The EU-Western Balkans Summit will consist of one session, in the first part with the participation of a limited number of external stakeholders. The session will focus on enhancing the engagement between the EU and the Western Balkans in the context of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. The Summit will be completed by a Leaders' working lunch, where an open exchange will take place. A press conference will follow.
10. The practical organisation of the Summit will respect status-neutrality.

E. PREPARATIONS

11. COREPER is invited to discuss preparations for the Summit on the basis of this note, and to endorse the main lines it sets out.
12. COREPER will take forward the preparatory work by, at one of its coming meetings, agreeing the draft outcome document with deliverables.
13. A strategic communication campaign to promote EU's values and objectives and counter disinformation will be designed for the Summit by the European External Action Service and the Commission services. The strategic communication campaign will maximise positive narratives and spotlight the EU's strengthened engagement with an unprecedented support provided to the region. The campaign will be developed for use both in the Western Balkans region and in EU Member States, to draw the attention of a wider public to the importance of the EU-Western Balkan partnership.