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NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Delegations

Subject: Advancing gradual integration for the Western Balkans
- Explanatory note and non-paper by Austria

Delegations will find in Annex, an explanatory note together with a non-paper by the Austrian delegation on “Advancing gradual intergration for the Western Balkans”.

This topic will be included as an ‘Any other business’ item on the agenda of the General Affairs Council meeting on 24 October 2023.

**Explanatory note regarding the AOB by AT
on the gradual integration of the Western Balkans**

At the General Affairs Council meeting on 24 October 2023, Austrian Federal Minister for the EU and Constitution Karoline Edtstadler would like to make an AOB on the importance of further advancing the gradual integration of the Western Balkans. She will use the opportunity to make reference to the already distributed AT non paper and highlight again the following proposals:

(1) Invitation of WB6 to GAC meetings;

(2) informal GAC meeting in the Western Balkans region;

(3) enhanced coordination of EU GAC ministers visits to the Western Balkans with a focus on enlargement and gradual integration of the Western Balkans following the forthcoming enlargement package and new growth plan for the Western Balkans

(proposed action: we suggest that the European Commission and the Council Secretariat coordinate and circulate a list of countries for joint visits over the next six months; GAC ministers could be accompanied by other ministers or commissioners depending on the focus of the mission and recommendation in the enlargement report).

Advancing gradual integration for the Western Balkans Non Paper by AT
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1. Institutional instruments:

- **Action Plan** to set **concrete implementation** steps of gradual integration until 2024 and beyond;
- **Country-specific Priority Action Plans for WB6** (according to the Priority Action Plan for UA) based on a gap analysis between the Stabilisation and Association Agreements and the three Association Agreements in order to reach DCFTA standards; full exploration of the SAAs;
- Appointment of a **Special coordinator for gradual integration** in the General Secretariat of the Commission and appointment of focal points/"one entry points" in the DGs.

2. Gradual political and administrative integration:

- Keep rhythm of **annual EU-WB6 summit meetings**;
- Increase regular informal **participation of WB6 in Council meetings** (building on example of regular invitation of Ukraine to segments of FAC meetings), following the model of COMIX/Schengen associated countries and expand "structured dialogue" (e.g. through establishing a list by EU Council Presidencies of informal Council meetings open for WB6 involvement);
- Explore options for further **informal WB6 involvement in EU fora** (COWEB and PSC meetings; other Working Groups where issues of common interest such as migration, science and education, climate and energy etc. are discussed; EU Agencies, European Economic and Social Committee, EP, Comitology Committees, Commission Expert Groups);
- Hold **informal Council meetings** in the Western Balkans region;
- Increase EU visibility in the WB region through **targeted and coordinated travel by MS to WB6**;
- Establish **internships for WB6 nationals in EU institutions** (based on example of Ukrainian interns).

3. Financial support:

- Dynamization through an **enhanced incentive system** modeled on recovery and resilience plans and through increased support to strengthen the recipients' absorption capacity (in conjunction with corresponding reform/strengthening of IPA);
- **Consistent approach in EU's external financing for candidate and potential candidate countries**, including through an even stronger performance-based IPA and closer cooperation with international financial institutions (IFIs);
- **Support the participation in EU programmes** through IPA co-funding.

4. Examples of possible policy areas for advancing gradual integration:

- **Single market:** e.g. industrial and consumer goods, public procurement, eCommerce, participation in the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA), eID, geographical scope of the geo-blocking-regulation, issue "EU candidate country" labels as opposed to "third country";
- **Trade and customs:** e.g. further facilitation of trade through customs cooperation, consider WB6 as partners in Critical Raw Materials, Net-Zero Industry and EU Open Strategic Autonomy;
- **Climate, environment, energy and agriculture:** e.g. Copernicus/ESA, EU Biodiversity Strategy, EU Strategy "From Farm to Fork", LIFE Programme; EU4Energy (create platform as with Eastern partnership countries), Strategic Dialogues on Renewable Energy;
- **Transport:** e.g. enhance integration into TEN-T standards and the EU rail market;
- **Health:** e.g. EU4Health, joint procurement for critical medicines;

- **Education, science and youth:** e.g. European Higher Education Area (EHEA), European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST), DiscoverEU;
 - **Migration and home affairs:** e.g. participation in European Migration Network (EMN), enhance cooperation with FRONTEX and EUROPOL;
 - **Justice:** e.g. participation in European Judicial Network (EJN), European Judicial Network in civil and commercial matters and European Judicial Training Network (EJTN); expand cooperation with EUROJUST.
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