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EU-WESTERN BALKANS BRDO SUMMIT: KURTI-VUCIC'S DIVIDE BUILDS UP. YET, THE DIALOGUE WOULD KEEP ON

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Hosted by the Council's Slovenian presidency in Brdo, near the capital Ljubljana, the EU Western Balkans summit gathered leaders from the EU member states and the Western Balkans 6. Also, representatives of the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the World Bank (WB) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) attended the meeting. The summit is part of the EU's efforts towards the Western Balkans, pursuant to the Strategic Agenda 2019-2024.

"The EU is a staunch supporter of multilateralism and a defender of a rules-based international order, while rejecting protectionism", and the "the Western Balkans is a region of strategic importance for the EU", said the President of the European Council, Charles Michel.¹ While addressing the plenary session, the President of the European Commission (EC), Ursula von der Leyen, openly assured that the EU is not complete without the Western Balkans, and there is no doubt about the enlargement. In parallel, while talking about the reforms in key areas, von der Leyen reminded that "our partners are not there yet, but they have made much progress and now it is time to stay in the course."²

Also, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel took part in the event, by clarifying that the EU sees its obligation to open up the prospect of membership for the 6.³ And Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Sturz alluded to that if the EU does not offer any serious perspective to the region, then it must be aware that other great powers such as Russia, China, or Turkey will try to fill the void.⁴

In Brdo the participants reiterated that the EU is the main political, economic and trade policy partner for the region. Such a key geostrategic relationship has been renewed by Brussels willing to deliver about EUR 30 Bill of financial support over the next 7 years through its Economic and Investment Plan (EIP). Shortly, this funding aims to promote sustainable, green, and digital growth benefiting both the region and Europe.⁵

The summit talks covered a discussion on the status of the accession process for the 6, being at different stages in their path towards the EU: Serbia and Montenegro have been negotiating their accession since 2014 and 2012 respectively; Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have not submitted their application yet. With a look at Albania and North Macedonia, Merkel called for the international governmental conferences (IGCs) to begin the accession processes with both countries soon. And the EC has, in fact, reaffirmed that in its recent

¹Oral conclusions drawn by President Charles Michel following the informal meeting of the members of the European Council in BrdopriKranju, Slovenia, 6 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/10/06/oral-conclusions-drawn-by-president-charles-michel-following-the-informal-meeting-of-the-members-of-the-european-council-in-brdo-pri-kranju-slovenia/>

²EU-Western Balkans Summit 2021: As it happened, European Western Balkans, 6 October 2021. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/10/06/eu-western-balkans-summit-2021-live/>

³EU affirms European prospects for the Western Balkans. Available at: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/europa/eu-western-balkans-summit-1965900>

⁴Brdo summit, EU Commission vows to accord €30 billion to the Western Balkans, 6 October 2021. Available at: <https://euronews.al/en/balkans/2021/10/06/brdo-summit-eu-commission-vows-to-accord-e30-billion-for-the-western-balkans/>

⁵Brdo Declaration, 6 October 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/52280/brdo-declaration-6-october-2021-en.pdf>

enlargement package.⁶ For the former German Chancellor, the next step would be to reach an agreement between Bulgaria and North Macedonia so that Sofia would join other countries in ending its opposition and agree about the accession's conference.⁷

In Brdo the EU and its member States, in consultation with the Western Balkans leaders convened on a common declaration, whereas the EU's unequivocal support for the European perspective of the region, being a mutual strategic interest, has been reaffirmed. Yet, the EU's commitment to the enlargement process relies on credible reforms by partners, fair and rigorous conditionality, and the principle of own merits. Likewise, the Western Balkans reiterated their dedication to European values and principles and to carrying out the necessary reforms in the interest of their people.

Also, the EU welcomed the restated commitment of the countries concerned to the primacy of democracy, fundamental rights, and rule of law, as well as to the fight against corruption and organized crime, support of good governance, human rights, gender equality and the rights of persons belonging to minorities. Equally, Brussels specified that these engagements rely on the meaningful implementation of the necessary reforms. Besides that, it emphasized that an empowered civil society and independent and pluralistic media are crucial for a democratic system to step up.

Moreover, the EU displayed its full support to an inclusive regional cooperation and strengthening good neighbourly relations across the WB6, by reminding the urgency of implementing definitive, inclusive, and binding solutions to partners' bilateral disputes and issues. Particularly, the EU reaffirmed its full support to the EU Special Representative's efforts for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, while striving for a normalization of their mutual relations.⁸

Kurti-Vucic's cleavage confirmed. Resuming the Dialogue is on the agenda though

At the summit the cleavage between Kurti and Vucic appeared to be more solid than ever.

Kosovo's prime minister met with his Serbian counterpart in the presence of former German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the French President Manuel Macron. Kurti affirmed that the EU must continue to enlarge to "become Europe", while reminding that it is missing the 6 for being complete. Also, he openly criticized Brussels for not removing travel visas for his citizens, being the only ones in need of a visa to travel to the Schengen zone in the region, despite the EC's green light back in 2018.⁹ At present, the main obstacles to grant a visa-free regime are France's and the Netherlands's firm opposition. Yet, Kurti called the delay to liberalize visas for his citizens "a great injustice" by the EU.¹⁰

⁶European Commission. 2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, 19 October 2021. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/2021-communication-eu-enlargement-policy_en

⁷EU affirms European prospects for the Western Balkans. Available at: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/bregde/themen/europa/eu-western-balkans-summit-1965900>

⁸Brdo Declaration, 6 October 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/52280/brdo-declaration-6-october-2021-en.pdf>

⁹Kurti to meet Vucic in Slovenia in presence of Merkel and Macron, *euronews.al*, 6 October 2021. Available at: <https://euronews.al/en/kosovo/2021/10/06/kurti-to-meet-vucic-in-slovenia-in-presence-of-merkel-and-macron/>

¹⁰PM Kurti asks EU to abolish visas for Kosovo citizens calling the delay "a great injustice", *schengenvisa.info.news*, 6 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.schengenvisa.info.com/news/pm-kurti-asks-eu-to-abolish-visas-for-kosovo-citizens-calling-the-delay-a-great-injustice/>

The Kosovo's premier reminded that the Republic of Kosovo has a democratic government and institutional stability. Besides that, he asked for a condemnation about the recent Serbian army's engagement at the northern border with Kosovo.¹¹

Also, Kurti openly said to support reaching an agreement with and among the WB6 on the condition that everyone is treated equally and that citizens are the ultimate beneficiaries in the end.¹²In a tweet (6 October 2021) the premier made some reservations about the Brdo declaration by reminding that "when we say Western Balkans, we should say Western Balkans 6, since there are 6 countries".

Aleksandar Vucic's participation in the summit, and his reminder about Greece's continuous support to Serbia's territorial integrity swept away any illusion about any plausible *rapprochement* between Belgrade and Pristina for the time to come. In addition, he reiterated that without a solution for what he referred to as "Kosovo and Metohija", there is no entry into the European Union. As for the Pristina-Belgrade dialogue Vucic stated that technical issues such as the mutual diplomas' recognition remain to be solved. Yet, the first matter on the agenda must be, in his view, the formation of the Community of Serbian Municipalities (CSMs).¹³

Simultaneously, he confirmed that the Dialogue would continue.¹⁴ How far this will materialize remains uncertain at present. One thing is sure though: a stalemate in the process would consolidate further an ill-fated constellation being disadvantageous for Pristina, Belgrade, and Brussels.

¹¹The Prime Minister Office. At the summit in Slovenia, Prime Minister Kurti called on skeptical EU leaders to recognize progress achieved in Kosovo and lift visa regime, 6 October 2021. Available at: <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/at-the-summit-in-slovenia-prime-minister-kurti-called-on-sceptical-eu-leaders-to-recognise-progress-achieved-in-kosovo-and-lift-visa-regime/>

¹²Kurti's statement post EU-summit: More regional cooperation as equals, Euronews, 6 October 2021. Available at:<https://euronews.al/en/kosovo/2021/10/06/kurtis-statement-post-eu-summit-meeting-more-regional-cooperation-as-equals>

¹³Vucic: "I asked Kurti only one question. Macron understood everything", b92.net, 6 October 2021. Available at: https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?nav_id=111915

¹⁴ EU-Western Balkans Summit 2021: As it happened, European Western Balkans, 6 October 2021. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/10/06/eu-western-balkans-summit-2021-live/>

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