

Outcome of the 2022 EU- Western Balkans Summit: The Last Straw?

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INTRODUCTION

Between the 2021 and 2022 EU-Western Balkans summit, drastic geopolitical and economic changes spread across Europe. All very much linked to the return of war to the continent, the first time since the 1990s outbreak across the former Yugoslavia. Since February 2022, active conflict returned to Eastern Europe, and therein radically changed EU and Western Balkan priorities. When EU leaders and leaders from the Western Balkan-six met in Brussels on 23 June 2022, tensions were running higher and stakes were, not high, but at the tipping point. This Policy Note delves into the expectations of the latest EU-Western Balkans summit, and puts it against the concrete deliverables it brought, as well as the European Council conclusions on 'Wider Europe' adopted those same days. We break down elements to show that the EU's language fundamentally does not match its engagement, especially on the lingering issue of the Republic of Kosovo.

I. EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY: FROM THE SUMMIT TO THE COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS

Never has the Eastern neighborhood and linked likeminded countries been so relevant for Europe. With Russia putting Ukraine's territorial sovereignty under attack, the power vacuum across the Western Balkans was brought to the forefront of EU concerns.

As such, ahead of the 23-24 June European Council, the 2022 edition of the **annual EU-Western Balkan summit** took place on 23 June 2022. Main issues of discussion were "progress on EU integration and the challenges stemming from Russia's aggression against Ukraine"¹. Building off that, the set meeting objectives were: explore innovative ways to advance accession talks rooted in the EU's revised enlargement methodology, encourage structural reforms to implement the EU acquis, and seek progress in the gradual integration between the EU and the Western Balkans region. From the Western Balkan side, the goal was clear: achieve quantifiable progress in accession prospects. Burning issues from the third countries' side were, for instance and principally, opening official negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, and unblock Kosovo's visa liberalization. In other words, amid the active conflict in Eastern Europe and the EU's ambition to assert itself as a credible geopolitical player, expectations were very much set on real deliverables being achieved when it comes to EU integration progress for official candidates and potential candidates alike. Nevertheless, reality did not match the Western Balkan's expectations. In truth, that week progress was achieved but laser-focused on admitting more official candidates into the club. As for the existing enlargement countries, the meeting consisted of mostly taking stock of what has been done and what remains a priority

First, leaders from both sides discussed and assessed how to boost the **resilience of the Western Balkans** to hybrid threats (i.e. cyber-threats, disinformation, Russian propaganda exerting influence on the region), linked to a heightened vulnerability in light of Russia's war on Ukraine. Second, leaders took stock of the critical funding being provided to the six partner countries within the framework of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans (EIP), dedicated to enhancing connectivity and energy security, as well as encouraging private investments towards the green and digital twin transitions, a new cornerstone of EU external action. Third, people-to-people actions was also highlighted in discussions, specifically in the

¹ European Council, "EU-Western Balkans leaders' meeting, 23 June 2022", accessed 20 September 2022, online via <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/06/23/>.

need to create opportunities for the youth in order to effectively counter the ‘brain drain’ trend across all countries in the region. On the topic of actual EU integration progress, the main outcome was that “EU leaders expressed their unambiguous support for integrating the Western Balkans in the EU”². Building off this recap of main outcomes, it is easy to see that the deliverables did not bring confidence or progress – only more discussions and action points.

How could such a high-level political event not deliver appropriately in times of crisis? The reason lies in the fact that the EU-Western Balkans summit was, this year, merged with the **European Council of 23-24 June**. For this reason, the EU did in fact deliver headlines-worthy progress, except linked to other countries and other, newfound strategic priorities. As such, the core reality of the EU-Western Balkans is that it was outshined by the European Council and the emphasis put on Ukraine, as well as Moldova and Georgia.

As key message, the European Council Conclusions confirmed the EU will continue to **strongly support Ukraine’s socioeconomic, military and financial resilience**, both by continuing to deliver on sanctions against Russia as well as to provide increased military support to Ukraine and dedicated funding for reconstruction of the country.

In parallel to the above, the Council Conclusions announced the proposal to launch the notion of **‘Wider Europe’, a European political coordination platform joining EU and non-EU nations**. The proposal announcement remained vague at this early stage, nothing that “It could concern all European countries with whom we have close relations”³ and that the goal “would be to foster political dialogue and cooperation to address issues of common interest so as to strengthen the security, stability and prosperity of the European continent”⁴. However, the Council Conclusions are clear on one thing: that the Wider Europe platform does not seek to replace any existing EU policies or instruments already operating in the countries, including the enlargement package.

In line with this, EU27 leaders proposed on new layers of cooperation with European non-EU countries and deepened cooperation with new countries, while ongoing relations stagnate further. Concretely, the EU formally announced its decision “to **grant the status of candidate country to Ukraine and to the Republic of Moldova**”⁵, and the decision “to grant the status of **candidate country to Georgia once the priorities specified in the Commission’s opinion on Georgia’s membership application have been addressed**”⁶. On Ukraine and Moldova, the next step is for the Commission to report on where both countries stand vis-à-vis the enlargement policy’s essential conditions all candidate countries must satisfy to become an EU member state, including political and economic criteria. However, in reality, it is important to remind that being granted official candidate status may still take years to come into fruition and, until then, remains a more symbolic gesture rather than consequential for EU external or internal affairs. Taking the current state of enlargement affairs into consideration, we find official candidate Serbia in somewhat of a limbo mode given political closeness and support to Russia, and held up opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. Arguably, even more so on following up on Georgia’s bid for candidacy, once the strategic momentum generated around Eastern European countries amid the war in Ukraine fades. The case in point is Kosovo as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, longstanding potential candidates with Stabilization Association Agreements which entered into force in 2016 and 2015 respectively, yet remain at a standstill. In

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ European Council, European Council meeting (23 and 24 June 2022) – Conclusions EUCO 24/22, 24 June 2022, point 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, point 13.

addition, when it comes to funding and resources for Ukraine for example, granting candidate status “should not have direct implications for the types of aid and support that are already being made available”⁷.

Moving on to **Council Conclusions regarding the Western Balkans, no deliverables were agreed** – only commitments and amplifications of the, by now “without delay”⁸, need to integrate the Western Balkan region into the European project. Discussions between North Macedonia and Bulgaria to enable the former to move forward with accession were flagged as in need to be settled swiftly, whereas no mention was made to Albania. The promotion of Bosnia and Herzegovina from potential to official candidate was also raised as the clear forthcoming goal for the EU for the country. The Council tasked the Commission with reporting on the country’s implementation on key priorities, once the primary issue of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s proper constitutional and electoral reform is finalized in a constructive manner, in line with EU standards. Finally, on Kosovo and the infamous Dialogue on the normalization of relations with Serbia, the Council Conclusions singled this political agreement out when reaffirming “the urgency of making tangible progress in resolving outstanding bilateral and regional disputes”⁹.

The June Council Conclusions were a **turning point for relations between the EU and certain Eastern European countries**. Nevertheless, for the Western Balkans, it was a reminder that relations have stagnated and interest seems to be fading into subtle non-committal wording. In the next section we break down official statements by the EU and its senior officials on the way forward for engagement in and with the Western Balkans countries, to spot inconsistencies and provide an assessment on where we stand and what this means for the particular issue of Kosovo.

II. BREAKING DOWN OFFICIAL EU STATEMENTS AND STRATEGIC ORIENTATIONS

The enlargement process for the Western Balkans has been ongoing since the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit. While Croatia acceded in 2013, the remaining six linger in a seemingly endless loop of criteria, negotiations, political dialogues and side-agreements. At this point of the game, the best way to assess the concrete outcomes of this year’s EU-Western Balkan summit, this note will break down the chosen political wording and qualitative commitments by the EU. It will show that statements are not only just empty, but also reaching a contradictory nature vis-à-vis EU deliverables to enlargement region.

To start, let us review the main results of the EU-Western Balkans leaders' meeting of 23 June 2022, as published in the European Council’s official website. It is stated that “The leaders’ meeting was an opportunity to promote action aimed at creating opportunities for young people and tackling 'brain drain' in the region. The aim is to strengthen a **sense of belonging to the same community among citizens in the EU and in the Western Balkans region**”¹⁰. Yet, how can this strive for a sense of sameness and community be true if Kosovar citizens must undertake heavy financial and administrative burdens to be able to enter the Schengen Area or the EU? Kosovo’s lack of visa liberalization objectively marks the EU’s decision of their non-belonging to their community.

⁷ Al Jazeera, “Analysis: What does Ukraine joining the EU really mean?”, 17 June 2022, online via <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/17/analysis-what-would-ukraine-joining-the-eu-really-mean>.

⁸ *Ibid*, points 18 and 21.

⁹ European Council, European Council meeting (23 and 24 June 2022) – Conclusions EUCO 24/22, 24 June 2022, point 19.

¹⁰ European Council, “EU-Western Balkans leaders' meeting, 23 June 2022”, accessed 20 September 2022.

Further, it is stated that the leader's meeting was an opportunity to "promote alignment with EU values and the common foreign and security policy (combat Russian propaganda and disinformation)"¹¹. Looking closer, focusing on working together to **combat Russian propaganda and disinformation** with the Western Balkan states is quite contradictory since, after all, Serbia is known to, as a state and mandated by central authorities led by President Vucic himself, participate in disinformation. Euroactiv notes that "Vučić has long weaponized Serbian media to spread divisive rhetoric around Kosovo and other issues (...) allow[ing] Russian disinformation to flourish in the mainstream media"¹². This showcases how discussions remained at a superficial and statement level, and did not delve into operational discussions on tangible risks and mitigation actions needed to address this hybrid threat.

Finally, still in the framework of the 2022 EU-Western Balkans Leader's Meeting, an announced main result was that "EU leaders expressed their **unambiguous support for integrating the Western Balkans** in the EU"¹³. Should we break down this statement, the inevitable question arises: is Bulgaria's current stance towards the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia the definition of ambiguous? To recall, Bulgaria is currently the only European Council vote opposing opening accession negotiations with the official candidate over the rights of the ethnic Bulgarian minority in the country. Taking on the perspective of third countries, the candidate countries, it is unavoidable that they take such statements with a grain of salt, which does not work in the benefit of trust-building between the sides, nor brews confidence in the progress of bilateral or regional relations.

Looking now at the **remarks by Charles Michel, the President of the European Council**, before the leader's Meeting with Western Balkan counterparts, his oral commitments also do not necessarily match the high-level discussions held in practice. He flagged that "This is an important moment because there is a very strong political will to re-energize the process with the Western Balkans, to send a very clear and strong message. Of course, for the time being, there are still discussions in Bulgaria"¹⁴. Taking on a devil's advocate optics, one can easily argue that, should political will really be as strong, wouldn't it manifest in such political summits? If it does not and discussions do not progress, can we still state there is political will? While EU engagement in third countries presupposes political commitment and local coordination as a key assumption for the successful execution of actions, it must be indicated that it should go both ways, and therefore the EU must also be held accountable in delivering on political commitments.

Passing now onto wording signals to be found in the **Council conclusions adopted following the 23-24 June 2022 European Council**, the main announcements concerned the membership applications from Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia. The official policy direction laid out in the Council conclusions underlines that "Each country's progress will depend on **its own merits in meeting the Copenhagen criteria**, and also on the **EU's capacity to accept new members**"¹⁵. It was the first time such a tough caveat was included in mentions of new

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Euractiv, "To stop war breaking out in Kosovo, media freedom in Serbia must be addressed", 17 August 2022, online via <https://www.euractiv.com/section/disinformation/opinion/to-stop-war-breaking-out-in-kosovo-we-must-address-media-freedom-in-serbia/>.

¹³ European Council, "EU-Western Balkans leaders' meeting, 23 June 2022", accessed 20 September 2022.

¹⁴ European Council, "Doorstep of President Charles Michel ahead of the European Council and the EU-Western Balkans' leaders meeting", accessed 20 September 2022, online via <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/06/23/doorstep-of-president-charles-michel-ahead-of-the-european-council-and-the-eu-western-balkans-leaders-meeting/>.

¹⁵ European Council, "European Council, 23-24 June 2022", accessed 20 September 2022, online via <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2022/06/23-24/>.

enlargement waves. Indeed ensuring enlargement is mutually-beneficial for both the EU and the candidates countries has proven increasingly important for EU Member States. With enlargement fatigue affecting domestic politics and citizens support for the EU project as a whole, accessions must be strategic and cautious. On the other side of the coin, candidate countries have been putting in the work towards EU *acquis* reforms for over a decade, and seek reassurance. For this reason, the inclusion of the above caveat, granting the EU final say on accession finalization notwithstanding the candidate's readiness is both transparent and unsettling. Further down the 23-24 June Council conclusions, the topic of Western Balkans are particularly mentioned. The agreed text reads: "The European Union **expresses its full and unequivocal commitment to the EU membership perspective of the Western Balkans** and calls for the acceleration of the accession process"¹⁶. Here, once more, the use of 'full an unequivocal' may not fully translate the reality – in practice for instance, one Member State, Bulgaria, is putting great conditions to its backing of North Macedonia's accession. What's more, 5 EU Member States still do not recognize Kosovo's independence and visa liberalization for the newborn country lingers on to no results amid the EU's inter-institutional system of approval. The Conclusions also notes that "the gradual integration between the European Union and the region already during the enlargement process itself in a reversible and merit-based manner"¹⁷. This addition to the text for a second time puts forth a caveat for integration, a non-committal clause. Notwithstanding, this Policy Note considers this addition to be useful and possibly beneficial. Taking the example of Serbia, the ever more authoritarian government, it is beneficial to be able to halt integration with Serbia should the state and institutions become more captured. Also, the accession progress of Turkey had already shown the EU that it must be clear that progress towards further integration and full membership is merit-based and can be overturned.

Linking this to the wider **EU Council's 'A new strategic agenda for 2019-2024'**, we find EU external action and its strategic priorities labelled as "its own unique model of cooperation as inspiration for others"¹⁸. Zooming into the enlargement package, the official ongoing 5-year EU Council Strategy notes "It will uphold the European perspective for European States able and willing to join"¹⁹. Once more, frustrated skeptics in the Western Balkans can argue that that candidate and potential candidate countries' EU harmonization efforts are not being upheld nor rewarded. For instance, while Kosovo is the Western Balkan country with the biggest EU support and aspirations as an integral part of their foreign and domestic policies, it remains an unofficial accession candidate. The immense support the EU has dedicated to its domestic reforms and national progress does not, nevertheless, substitute the need to promote Kosovo's advancement along the accession route.

Finally, and most recently, on 14 September, European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen gave her **2022 State of the European Union (SOTEU) address**. She presented the priorities of EU internal and external action for the upcoming year, laying out the most pressing challenges and needs. Indeed, since the last SOTEU, a lot has changed in the EU's neighborhood and for the EU's geopolitical and geostrategic landscape since Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Von der Leyen indicated the EU's readiness to collaborate closely with likeminded countries towards democracy and a rules-based order – "This is the time to invest in the power of democracies. This work begins with the core group of our like-minded partners. (...) This starts

¹⁶ European Council, European Council meeting (23 and 24 June 2022) – Conclusions EUCO 24/22, 24 June 2022, point 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ European Council, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/20/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024/>

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

with those countries that are already on the path to our Union. So, I want the people of the Western Balkans, of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to know: You are part of our family, your future is in our Union, and our Union is not complete without you! This watershed moment in global politics calls for a rethink of our foreign policy agenda”²⁰. Closer analysis of her speech, this note reaches the following conclusions: while the Western Balkans were put in the same basket as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia here, this was a purely out of need, for the EU simply could not exclude the Western Balkans in such a statement of likeminded and close countries that constitute the future of the Union. However, the EU27’s focus on the future lies in pulling Eastern Europe closer and within the scope of EU membership prospects, much like it has hooked the Western Balkans down this path of reforms and political closeness. Upon closer inspection of the SOTEU 2022, we also see quantified the faded interest in the Western Balkans vis-à-vis Eastern Europe: in the SOTEU 2021²¹, ‘Ukraine’ was not mentioned, whereas in the SOTEU 2022 it was mentioned 22 times; Georgia and Moldova were not mentioned in 2021 and mentioned twice in 2022 and, as for the Western Balkans, they were mentioned twice in 2021 and only mentioned once in 2022.

In the end, credible support to third countries starts with political statements and symbolic commitments, yet must be followed-up on with credible deliverables on the ground, operationally, and at the high-level, politically. Only this way will the enlargement package brew trust and confidence among the eventual-equal members within this Union of solidarity and common interests and policies. Examining the statements put forth by EU senior officials, it is clear that the Western Balkans are indeed a strategic priority of EU foreign policy, yet both local and EU-based obstacles hampering smooth progress drain enthusiasm and momentum.

Looking very quickly at **the sui generis** issue of Kosovo, political support and expectations have been particularly tricky. Indeed, tensions Kosovo-Serbia and the obstacle they constitute for further EU integration and support can go so far as 1997, in the Council meeting on General Affairs, where the EU, which stated that “the EU expects from Belgrade substantial progress on the issue of Kosovo”²². Back to current days. the fact remains that among the concrete deliverables benefiting the Western Balkans, what is most urgently and non-sensically lacking is visa liberalization for Kosovo. Regarding the new proposition of a Wider Europe platform, a question to be asked is: will this be yet another framework for Kosovo to fall just outside the scopes of, given its limited recognition among the EU 27?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In truth and in view of the breaking down exercise undertaken, the European Council did not provide clarity on the way forward for the Western Balkans’ EU hopes; it just confused the rules of the game more, as more candidate countries joined the enlargement package and more caveats were flagged that the EU can resort to should negotiations get tricky.

Moving forward, it would be important that Western Balkan leaders hold the EU senior officials accountable to their statements, and tactfully call them out if inaccurate to the current situation. After all, strategic communications is an increasingly important foreign policy tool, and communicating objectives and results clearly is fundamental to foster trust in relations. This

²⁰ European Commission, “2022 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen”, accessed 22 September 2022, online via https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/speech_22_5493.

²¹ European Commission, “2021 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen”, accessed 22 September 2022, online via https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_21_4701.

²² European Commission, “2003rd Council meeting - GENERAL AFFAIRS - Luxembourg, 29/30 April 1997”, 13 May 1997, accessed 21 September 2022, online via https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES_97_129.

being said, given the sensitive nature of relations, such discussions and statement-consultations should take place behind-the-scenes and at a more informal level, to not damage the coherent appearance of relations between the EU and its close partners, and vice-versa, between developing countries and the EU bloc.

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