

COMMENTARY: EU – WESTERN BALKANS SUMMIT

More reforms, more money

Jana Juzová

- [Wednesday's Summit](#) of EU and Western Balkans leaders was long-anticipated following the efforts aimed at reviving the EU enlargement process. The Summit was originally planned to be organized in Zagreb, under the Croatian EU presidency, however, due to the coronavirus pandemic, it was held as a videoconference. Nevertheless, the fact that the Summit was realized despite the current global situation, even on the scheduled date, demonstrates that the Western Balkan region represents a priority for Croatia as well as the rest of the EU, and that the EU genuinely wants to revitalize the enlargement process.
- It was expected that the Summit in Zagreb would follow up on the positive developments in the past months, those being the positive decision of the European Council on opening the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, and the adoption of a new enlargement methodology (i.e. set of rules leading the accession process). However, the Summit's agenda was naturally influenced by the current COVID-19 pandemic and the central topic was eventually the assistance provided by the EU to the Western Balkan countries and a larger plan for their economic recovery.

Towards a comprehensive plan for economic recovery

Prior to the Summit, the European Commission announced a special financial assistance package in total of 3.3 billion EUR for the recovery of the Western Balkan economies after the pandemic. This support was reaffirmed and acknowledged by the EU and Western Balkans leaders during the summit, and the European Commission is developing a proposal of a robust concrete economic and investment plan. The plan should help the Western Balkan countries not only to boost their economies but also to increase their competitiveness and make it easier to link them fully to the EU's single market. With regard to the economic recovery and future closer economic cooperation between the EU and the region, it was stressed the Western Balkan countries need to finish their transformation into functioning market economies, strengthen the rule of law guarantees and deepening their intra-regional cooperation. All these factors would contribute to increased competitiveness of the region and its attractiveness for foreign investments. The EU and Western Balkan leaders also agreed on a joint procurement and free trade agreement with regards to protective personal equipment.

In discussing the significant economic assistance the EU offers to the region during the coronavirus pandemic, it was also stressed that this assistance needs to be acknowledged and publicly communicated. This slight rebuke was arguably aimed mainly at the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, who disproportionately praised the assistance provided by China and Russia and downplayed the far more robust assistance from the EU.

Key to succes: Democracy and rule of law

The European perspective of the Western Balkan countries was reaffirmed during the video summit, and the leaders of the region, on the other hand, reaffirmed their commitment to the EU. As the new enlargement methodology adopted at the European Council Summit in March indicated, closer attention will be paid to whether the candidate countries truly implement the reforms aimed at strengthening the rule of law and respect the democratic principles. This was also confirmed at yesterday's summit, and the crucial importance of these fundamental conditions were stressed once again. Adding Albania and North Macedonia to the group of countries negotiating their accession into the EU, together with the stricter conditions of the accession process, provide the possibility of a faster progress of countries that genuinely want to implement the required reforms and respect democratic values,

while making it more difficult for countries which do not.

Higher requirements on the state of rule of law, fight against corruption, independence and functioning of democratic institutions, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of media, are even more significant in the current context when the grimmest decline in democratic governance is present in the countries formally closest to their EU accession – Montenegro and Serbia. Coincidentally, yesterday the NGO Freedom House Index published their [latest report](#) evaluating the state of freedom and democracy in individual countries. According to this report, Montenegro and Serbia are both no longer classified as democracies but as hybrid regimes due to the deterioration of rule of law and democratic governance. It seems the EU is aware of this contradiction between the poor state of democracy and progress in accession negotiations. The Summit's final declaration mentions that the increased EU assistance will be linked to progress on the rule of law and socio-economic reforms and respect for democratic principles and European values. The declaration further explicitly mentions the importance of the freedom of media and the crucial role independent media together with civil society have in the process of democratization.

The summit also reflected the recent appointment of the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and the

Western Balkans, the former Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajčák. The transfer of this agenda, originally covered by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, to the Special Representative, suggests that the Western Balkans are among the EU's top foreign policy priorities. A more active EU engagement in the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue is very important, especially now as the EU-led negotiations have been formally frozen in the past year and the mediator role was taken over by the USA, represented by the Special Envoy Richard Grenell. The final agreement reached in an untransparent negotiation under the American supervision might not necessarily benefit European interests given the Trump administration's singular focus on achieving a foreign policy victory before the upcoming US elections, irrespective of whether such an agreement benefits the region or its partner, the EU.

The final wording of the declaration might come as a disappointment for the Western Balkan countries as it does not mention EU membership, accession nor enlargement. This careful formulation of the final text could be attributed to the EU leaders' doubts about the sincerity of the Western Balkans' commitment to European values and democratic principles, or that several EU Member States not recognizing Kosovo as an independent state. Regardless, eventually the EU leaders will not be able to avoid the question what the "European perspective" of the region actually

means and will have to provide a clear definition. Meanwhile, the EU must strive to maintain the newly established dynamics in the enlargement agenda and do what it can to fight

off doubts about the political will of EU Member States to really integrate the Western Balkan countries into the EU.

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