



Final Declaration by the Chair of the Paris Western Balkans Summit (4 July 2016)

Building on the previous Berlin (28 August 2014) and Vienna (27 August 2015) Summits, France welcomed in Paris on 4th July 2016 the Heads of government, Foreign ministers and the ministers of economy of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, as well as Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Germany, Italy and representatives of the European Union and the International Financial Institutions.

The previous summit meetings led to progress in areas such as youth cooperation and connectivity in the fields of transport and energy. The participants also noted that the dynamic created by these meetings, as well as the various meetings held in the framework of the Brdo-Brijuni process, have significantly contributed to improving cooperation and good neighbourly relations in the region. An essential element of this process is the clear focus on a limited number of specific themes around bolstering the connectivity in terms of transport, energy, and people to people contacts.

The Paris summit aimed at ensuring increased coherence with the different regional initiatives promoting regional cooperation in light of the region's European perspective, especially the Brdo-Brijuni process.

The European continent is exposed to unprecedented security challenges, such as the large scale terrorist attacks. The Western Balkans are encouraged to strengthen regional cooperation which remains a key element for the stability of the region and of the whole of Europe.

I – The future of the Western Balkans lies in the European integration and in regional cooperation

In the circumstances marked by the outcome of the referendum in the UK, the Western Balkans participants reaffirmed that their future lies in the European Union. A clear European perspective was granted to all countries of the region during the Zagreb and Thessaloniki Summits in 2000 and 2003, repeatedly and unequivocally reiterated since then, on the basis of the relevant conditions and requirements. Substantial progress has been made by the region on its European path over recent years. We commend the efforts made by Western Balkans countries at the various stages of their respective accession process and call upon their continued efforts to keep advancing towards the European Union.

More than ever, the rule of law lies at the heart of the enlargement process, including through judicial reforms, and by tackling organized crime and corruption, as well as ensuring full respect of fundamental rights.

2. Regional cooperation is a key condition for the European perspective of a region that was affected by tragic conflicts less than 25 years ago. Since then, much progress has been achieved by the Western Balkans. Today, in Paris, we welcomed the path covered and called upon each country's continued efforts towards good neighbourly relations.

At the Paris summit, we recalled the importance of regional cooperation for the settlement of outstanding bilateral issues, as a follow-up to the Vienna summit. Reconciliation is essential for the stability of the region on the path towards EU accession. The Western Balkans participants reaffirmed their commitment to continue to work together in the spirit of the Vienna declaration of August 2015 and the Vienna conference in April 2016. They reaffirmed today their commitment to abstain from misusing outstanding bilateral issues in the EU accession process.

3. Today in Paris, a major step was taken to heal the wounds of the past in the region with the signature of the agreement establishing a Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO). Building on the 50-year experience of the Franco-German Youth Office for youth cooperation, the mission of the new office will be to support activities that promote reconciliation of the peoples as well as programmes on remembrance, diversity, intercultural exchange, regional mobility, citizen participation and the promotion of democratic values. All participants expressed their conviction that the RYCO would provide a major contribution to the reconciliation and the European future of the region by strengthening exchanges and learning mobility of its youth.

4. Regional cooperation is also a key element for economic growth within the Western Balkans as it leads to increased connectivity between populations, multiplication of cross-border and multi-country initiatives as well as of joint ventures. In the context of the current economic situation, regional cooperation is the one and only way to face common challenges. Regional organisations such as the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) will play an important role in this.

II – Connectivity and trade: an opportunity and a challenge for the region

5. Sustainable economic growth constitutes the basis of a prosperous future for the region. In order to achieve this goal, the Paris summit focused its efforts on increasing connectivity and opportunities for mutually beneficial trade in the region.

6. As regards connectivity, the Paris summit was an opportunity to take stock of the implementation of the projects that were launched in August 2015 and to call for further progress in that area. Agreed investment projects should be implemented quickly. In this regard all parties welcomed that some projects agreed under last year's investment package could be ready for ground-breaking ceremonies still in 2016. The participants also agreed upon a list of 3 new railway projects, which will receive EU co-financing of almost €100 million in addition to financing from the International Financial Institutions and the national budgets of the Western Balkan participants.

All participants of the region should benefit from the financial support to the connectivity agenda. Projects will continue to be considered in the whole region as soon as the political and technical pre-requisites have been addressed. Building on existing technical assistance, the Commission will explore how to further support the countries of the region in optimising their access to and use of international financial institutions' support.

The parties welcomed the launch of an initiative to ramp up investment in energy efficiency in residential buildings and sustainable development through additional EU funding of €50 million. The latter includes a programme to examine the best ways to develop the region's hydropower potential. In addition, the EU has commissioned a regional hydropower master-plan for the Western Balkans which will help define how to develop

the region's hydropower potential in a way that balances energy generation with environmental concerns.

A report on the implementation of the soft measures that were agreed upon a year ago to support connectivity in energy and transport was also presented. The implementation of these soft measures is crucial for the functioning of integrated energy and transport networks. The Western Balkans now need to increase their efforts, considering that progress on the implementation of the soft measures will improve the legal and regulatory framework in which infrastructure projects are developed, therefore attracting investments. They will continue to receive support for this from the European Commission, the South East European Transport Observatory and the Energy Community Secretariat. The Joint Action Plan for Western Balkan Trade and Transport Facilitation presented today by the Heads of Government of the Western Balkans constitutes a welcome contribution to this process, and it will enable also the World Bank to lend its support to the implementation of the EU's connectivity agenda in the Western Balkans.

The participants committed to further work on maturing priority investment projects included in the single project pipelines prepared by the National Investment Committees in each of the Western Balkans participants.

On energy, participants agreed on a road-map for the setting up of a regional market for electricity in the Western Balkans in order to facilitate the exchange of resources, to ensure the better use of existing power systems, integrating renewable energy production, and, eventually, connecting the regional market to that of the EU. The European Commission will follow up on this initiative, with support from the Energy Community secretariat. Progress on the implementation of the road-map will be reflected in future EU funding decisions.

On transport, the parties supported in general the aim of a Transport community treaty and welcomed further work towards progress on a common text.

On trade, the participants acknowledged with satisfaction the deepening of economic integration between the WB6 and recognised the positive role played by the EU by providing them with expertise, equipment and political support in this respect.

The participants reaffirmed the importance of fostering regional market integration, especially through CEFTA. In this context they welcomed the successful conclusions of negotiations on the Additional Protocol 5 on Trade Facilitation of the CEFTA Agreement, as well as the importance of concluding by the end of 2016 an Additional Protocol on Trade in Services. The CEFTA Secretariat will coordinate the preparation of this agreement. Progress made in the implementation of the Additional Protocol on Trade in Services will be reported at the next Summit.

III - Priority given to the youth

7. Improving the perspective of younger generations is of paramount importance to ensure stability, sustainable development and progress in the region. In this context, the parties discussed progress on the implementation of the Positive Agenda for the youth of the Western Balkans that was launched at the meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Brdo process on 23 April 2015.

As Erasmus+ covers the Western Balkans, notably by supporting the mobility of young volunteers, youth workers, students and academic staff, by building capacity in the fields of youth and higher education, and by encouraging dialogue between young people and decision-makers, they agreed on concrete proposals that shall lead to increased access for the region's youth to the Erasmus + scholarship programme, also taking into account the necessary promotion of entrepreneurship.

In that context, we welcome the idea of an executive study and exchange programme for young civil servants in the region, which will further drive forward the reconciliation efforts in the region and beyond.

The parties agreed that more needs to be done to tackle the high level of youth unemployment in the region. This issue is featuring prominently in the Economic Reform Programmes and in the policy guidance contained in the joint conclusions of the Economic and Financial dialogue between the EU and the Western Balkans and Turkey of 25 May 2016. Improving the participation rate of young people in the labour market is key to improve the perspective for the young generations in the region.

The parties commended the commitments for concrete actions adopted at the conference on work-based learning in Vienna on 18th May 2016, between representatives of public and private entities and underlined that high quality vocational education and training systems contribute to

supporting economic growth and reducing youth unemployment. They welcomed the invitation by France to hold the next conference on vocational education and training, with a special focus on entrepreneurship skills.

The parties welcome the joint science conferences held in Berlin in 2015 and Vienna in 2016. They reiterate their recommendation to allocate sufficient funding to research, with 3% of national GDP as a target and ask the national academies of science to propose, by their next conference to be held in France in 2017, funding mechanisms for excellent young researchers from the Balkans, allowing them to gain experience abroad and to create their own laboratories of excellence.

8. The start of the activities of the RYCO constitutes a unique opportunity to foster and accelerate the reconciliation and the regional cooperation between young people. We hope that this new organisation will help them develop their interest in active citizenship, volunteering and exchanges within the region, realising that they have more things to share than reasons to feel different. The participants expressed their intention to have their youth organisations fully cooperate with the RYCO.

IV – Tackling current challenges: migration and the fight against terrorism and radicalization

9. While further efforts need to be made to enhance infrastructure connectivity and to support initiatives for the youth, the Western Balkans and the European Union are facing joint challenges linked with migration and the fight against terrorism.

10. Europe is currently facing an unprecedented migration challenge. The Western Balkans have been and remain important partners to tackle this crisis and reduce illegal migration flows to Europe. The European Union and its Member States have also undertaken concrete actions to tackle this crisis and its consequences, notably by providing in-kind assistance and financial support to the administrations and host communities and by establishing stronger cooperation in the fight against human trafficking for which external border control is key. We reiterate, in that context, our support to the initiative of the European Investment Bank (EIB) in the Western Balkans to help foster investment. This initiative is fully in line with the new approach on migrations endorsed by the European council on June 28-29th.

Implementation of the commitments taken by the EU and Western Balkans at the high-level meeting that was organized on 8 October 2015 and at the following mini-summit on 25 October requires sustained efforts. In Paris, the parties identified the areas in which regional cooperation between the European Union and the Western Balkans should be further strengthened: return and readmission, information exchange, coordination, joint operations to fight smugglers' networks and organised crime, enhanced cooperation between border police forces. Participants also agreed on the importance of constantly monitoring the development of new migration routes through the region to the European Union.

11. Participants expressed their concern regarding terrorism and radicalization, especially among young people. They also recalled the importance of closer cooperation between the EU Member States and the Western Balkans, notably in the fight against arms trafficking, financing of terrorism, radicalisation and its prevention and border control. The parties confirmed their support to the Western Balkans counter-terrorism initiative and to the Salzburg forum. The participants called for reinforced judicial and operational measures to fight against arms trafficking, notably by systematically using the existing data bases and information exchange systems.

In order to better address the threat of terrorism and radicalisation, the participants agreed to reinforce the role of the Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre in the fight against these phenomena, including through strengthening the cooperation with Europol. Participants furthermore pledged to promote better implementation of the SEECP joint statement on terrorism adopted in Tirana on 24 February 2015. Finally, the European Commission announced additional financing through the Civil Society Facility towards NGOs involved in the prevention and fight of violent extremism.

12. The participating parties welcomed the readiness of Italy to host the next summit on the Western Balkans in 2017.