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## **EU-Western Balkans summit in Slovenia: empty gestures and the stalemate of enlargement policy**

**Another European Union-Western Balkans summit brought no progress in the context of the EU enlargement process. For the leaders of the Western Balkans, this is a clear signal of the lack of political support from the European Union, which could be translated into political success in the home country and in the region. A further reduction in the EU's credibility will encourage other actors to become more involved in the region.**

On October 6, 2021, another European Union-Western Balkans (WB6) summit was held in the Slovenian city of Brdo pri Kranju. This meeting was organized under the Slovenian Presidency of the EU. Slovenia, like Croatia, which presided over the work of the Union in the first half of 2020, is particularly interested in the situation in the Western Balkans (GB6) region due to its economic interests and geographical location.

The summit in Brdo pri Kranju, like the previous summit which took place on May 6, 2020 in Zagreb (due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was held via a digital/remote system), did not bring about any significant changes in the European Union enlargement process. The adopted Brdo pri Kranju Declaration, although relatively broad, reflects the impasse in the European Union's enlargement policy. The current policy of the European Union towards the Western Balkans is not oriented towards a constructive approach to the issue of European integration and solving specific problems (the rule of law, the judiciary, corruption, bilateral disputes, media freedom, democratic institutions). The reforms required by the EU are characterized primarily by excessive formalism, which is ineffective in South-Eastern Europe. The requirements on the part of the EU are not followed-up with sufficient political support, nor any real help in creating appropriate material and economic conditions, i.e., increasing the level of employment, quality of public services, etc., which would facilitate the implementation of institutional reforms.

The economic domination of the EU in its south-eastern periphery (establishing a market for goods produced in the EU and, above all, access to cheap labour) has been a fact for many years. Therefore, further political and institutional integration of the Western Balkan countries may, from the perspective of some Western European countries, only bring an increase in costs and political risk, while the potential benefits have already been achieved.

It is clear for all participants of the integration of the Western Balkans with the EU that membership of the European Union will not be possible in the coming years. This was actually confirmed by Jean Claude Juncker, the then president of the European Commission, who in 2018 declared that repeatedly mentioning the date 2025 as the date of possible WB6 membership in the European Union is not a promise, but rather an incentive for the region's leaders to intensify their efforts for integration with the European Union. These words were confirmed by North Macedonia's refusal to start accession negotiations after that state ended its long dispute with Greece, and the issue of the status of the Albanian minority in that country had been settled.

**Declaration from the Brdo pri Kranju summit.** The document refers to measures and instruments that already exist or remain distant and uncertain. Financial assistance has been agreed in advance, either as part of the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) or to help tackle the aftermath of Covid-19. The impressive amount of EUR 30 billion under the EIP also includes the potential investment attracted over the coming seven years and thus the actual expected added value. Furthermore, it is already known that some of this money is only bank guarantees, therefore, the tangible benefits of the EIP will hardly be noticed by the societies of the Western Balkans.

EU leaders have called for increased efforts in the process of the economic integration of the Western Balkans with the European Union and improved connectivity in the region. Undoubtedly, a clear indication is the renewal of the Western Balkan leadership's commitment to fully implement the European Green Deal, which has been identified as a key driver for the transition to modern, carbon-neutral, climate-resilient, and resource-efficient economies.

The declaration also contains a set of assurances about the partnership and the need to integrate the Western Balkans within the EU. Such phrases have appeared in the context of relations with the WB6 region for over 20 years and so, have since lost much of their original attractiveness. The declaration shows the de facto powerlessness of the European Union with regard to the region and sends a clear signal to the leaders of the Western Balkan countries that they lack the ideas, will, and initiative to give new dynamics to the European Union enlargement process.

**Western Balkan states' expectations.** The expectations of the Western Balkan states do not go beyond the framework adopted within the framework of the European Union's enlargement policy. Serbia and Montenegro wish to continue negotiating individual chapters as part of this process. On the other hand, North Macedonia and Albania want to start negotiations. Currently, they are blocked by Bulgaria, which is vetoing the relevant decision on North Macedonia due to a bilateral dispute between the two countries over cultural heritage and ethnic identity. Bulgaria's formal veto is also useful to those Western European states that are sceptical about further institutional and political integration of the Western Balkans with the EU.

In addition to the expectations related to formal accession negotiations, the leaders of the Western Balkans also point to the need to increase the available European funds. However, these countries' problems with the rule of law and corruption call into question their ability to adequately absorb the aid funds. Therefore, the EU is pushing for the development of intra-regional economic cooperation rather than relying on EU funds.

**Conclusions.** The lack of political will and the capacity of the European institutions and EU Member States to take further steps to integrate the WB6 countries significantly reduces the EU's credibility in this region, but also in the Eastern Partnership countries. The results of the Brdo pri Kranju conference show that the European Union's ability to act together outside the EU is limited. The example of North Macedonia, whose political elite has been able to end its long-standing dispute with Greece, clearly shows that the effort and political costs of unpopular reforms or actions internationally by pro-European leaders in the WB6 region can be ignored. The leaders of Kosovo and Serbia cannot be expected to bear enormous costs and political risks in resolving the bilateral dispute, offering in return vague assurances of partnership and a "European perspective".

Moreover, Bulgaria's veto on the commencement of accession negotiations by North Macedonia, and consequently also by Albania, should be read as de facto in the interest of countries such as France, the Netherlands, or Denmark, which are reluctant to see a further enlargement of the European Union to include countries still undergoing transformation, i.e., those that remain relatively unstable politically or institutionally. The possible admission of the WB6 countries into the European Union will also strengthen the group of "new" member states, including Poland. The position of some of these countries on many important issues concerning future economic development, including the redistribution of EU funds, differs from that of Western European countries.

Referring to political slogans repeated for years, but less and less significant, without providing specific incentives may be counterproductive. As a result, the soft power of the European Union is much more limited and reduced to the issue of transferring European funds. This situation, in turn, will allow other external actors such as Russia, Turkey, the United States, Arab states, and China to increase their influence in the Western Balkans region.