

EU-Western Balkans leaders' meeting on 23 June 2022

On 23 June 2022, for the first time since the start of Russia's war on Ukraine, the Heads of State or Government of the EU and of the six Western Balkan countries will meet for a leaders' meeting in Brussels. The discussion will focus on enlargement, energy, security and defence, and youth. Discussion of Emmanuel Macron's 'European Political Community' proposal is not on the agenda, but it could come up during the debate.

Background

On 18 May 2022, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, [announced](#) the holding of a meeting of EU and Western Balkan leaders, with the [aim](#) of promoting 'enhanced EU–Western Balkans engagement'. The meeting, to be organised in cooperation with the current French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, will [focus](#) on enlargement, energy, security and defence, and youth. It will take place in Brussels, on the morning preceding the European Council meeting of 23-24 June 2022. Back in December 2021, when presenting the priorities of the French Presidency of the Council, French President Emmanuel Macron [indicated](#) that a conference on the Western Balkans would be organised in June 2022. He also stressed that the Western Balkans were at the 'heart of Europe'. He pointed to the then already tense regional situation, underlined the Union's responsibility – urging it to re-engage with and invest in the Western Balkans – and called for support in countering disinformation. The President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, may also attend the leaders' meeting.

International and regional context

Russia's war on Ukraine has reshaped Europe's security architecture. Analysts [warn](#) of possible 'aftershocks in the Balkans', stressing that more must be done to counter disinformation originating in Russia, and to boost 'energy diversification and infrastructure', so as to reduce the region's dependence on Russia and China. The five Western Balkan countries that are members of the United Nations – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia – voted in favour of the United Nations General Assembly [resolution](#) condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Unity in condemning the aggression did not, however, translate into unity in setting up and implementing sanctions on Russia. Only [Albania](#), [Kosovo*](#), [Montenegro](#) and [North Macedonia](#) have so far joined the EU in imposing [sanctions](#) on Russia. The three countries in the region that are members of NATO – [Albania](#), [North Macedonia](#) and [Montenegro](#) – have provided Ukraine with military equipment and assistance. In contrast, [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) and [Serbia](#) have refused to impose sanctions on Russia, with Serbia even [prolonging](#) its gas contract, although they have maintained EU accession as a priority for their countries.

The meeting format and venue

The EU leaders and the leaders of the six Western Balkan countries will meet in Brussels for a leaders' meeting as opposed to a regular EU–Western Balkans summit. The main difference between the two types of meeting lies in the role played by the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU. At past EU–Western Balkans summits, the rotating Bulgarian, Croat and Slovenian Presidencies played central roles in preparing the meetings, considering it the pinnacle of their respective presidencies. The forthcoming EU–Western Balkans leaders' meeting takes place during the French Presidency of the Council, but does not represent its core event, which was the [Versailles Summit](#) of 10-11 March 2022. The choice of venue – Brussels – is yet another confirmation of the less prominent role of the rotating presidency in the meeting; thus, Charles Michel and his team will have the upper hand in managing the proceedings.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

The main agenda points

The topics on the agenda – energy, security and defence, and youth – are not new. They belong to the key priorities discussed at past EU–Western Balkans summits and/or outlined in the declarations adopted by the EU leaders, 'in consultation with Western Balkans leaders', in [Sofia](#) (2018), [Zagreb](#) (2020) and [Brdo](#) (2021).

Energy is by far the most challenging topic in the context of Russia's war on Ukraine, and high [dependency](#) on Russian fossil fuels. At Versailles, EU leaders decided to phase out the Union's dependence on Russian fossil fuels. They reached out to the Western Balkan countries, with a call 'to enhance connectivity with our immediate neighbourhood' and, at subsequent meetings, [agreed](#) on a voluntary [joint procurement mechanism](#) for gas, liquefied natural gas and hydrogen, open to the region. On security and defence, cooperation is multifaceted, covering areas [ranging](#) from Western Balkan countries contributions to EU missions and operations, to security sector reform and intelligence cooperation. With respect to youth, leaders may take stock of progress made in the implementation of the '[innovation agenda for the Western Balkans](#)' launched in [Brdo](#). Youth policies are key to stabilising the region and reversing existing trends that make the Western Balkans a '[net emigration](#)' region.

State of play on enlargement

Progress is lacking on enlargement, despite the [revised methodology](#) from 2020, which [allows](#) countries to 'phase in' to EU programmes. Montenegro and Serbia are the [frontrunners](#), although the pace remains rather slow. Furthermore, Serbia's [proximity](#) to Russia and reluctance to advance in resolving its dispute with Kosovo could result in an even [slower](#) pace. Solving neighbourly disputes remains one of the main criteria for EU accession. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has [underlined](#) that, 'when a brutal war is being waged in our immediate neighbourhood, it is of central importance that both countries (Serbia and Kosovo) gradually resolve their conflict'. Two other countries – Albania and North Macedonia – are waiting for accession negotiations to begin. Despite several calls, including from [Germany](#), to solve the outstanding [dispute](#), Bulgaria is still blocking the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia; with an indirect impact on Albania. The remaining two countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo – are lagging behind owing to the absence of reforms and, in the case of the former, political instability, which a newly brokered [political agreement](#) could, if implemented in full, help overcome.

Past declarations were rather similar in content and messages – focusing inter alia on counter-terrorism cooperation, illegal migration and the European perspective of the Western Balkans – and were frequently [addressed](#) by the European Council in connection with the region. The word 'enlargement' appears only in the Brdo Declaration, where EU leaders underlined that 'fair and rigorous conditionality and the principle of own merits' should apply, inviting countries from the region to stay on course with their reforms. In a direct attempt to counter mounting disinformation, the Brdo Declaration [stated](#) that the EU is 'the region's closest partner, main investor and principal donor'.

European political community initiative

On 9 May 2022, President Macron invited the EU and like-minded non-EU countries in Europe to consider forming a '[European political community](#)' (EPC), to 'complement' but not substitute for the enlargement process. The proposal is expected to be debated during the forthcoming [European Council](#) meeting under the agenda point 'wider Europe'. The EPC proposal has raised [criticism](#) from Ukraine, which initially saw it as an attempt to sideline its application for EU membership. The proposal has received [mixed reactions](#) in countries in the Western Balkans, with some, including North Macedonia, viewing it as 'an excellent opportunity to unite countries that failed or did not want to join the bloc at a given moment, given the new geopolitical situation'. Touring the region ahead of the EU–Western Balkans leaders' meeting, Charles Michel [stressed](#) that the aim was 'not to replace the EU accession process' but to grant 'immediate political integration' and allow regular political dialogue among leaders', and hence stimulate progress on EU integration and accession.

European Parliament position

In an exceptional development, Parliament's political group leaders adopted a [joint statement](#) ahead of the 23–24 June European Council meeting, expressing support for the Western Balkans on their EU integration path, and calling on the EU leaders to 'maintain' the Union's 'long-standing commitment' to the region.

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