

Outcome of the Zagreb EU-Western Balkans video-summit of 6 May 2020

The EU-Western Balkans Summit, which normally would have been held in Zagreb, took place by video-conference on Wednesday 6 May 2020. Twenty years after the Zagreb Summit in 2000, which first expressed the ‘European perspective’ of the countries of the Western Balkans, this video-summit aimed to stress unity and solidarity between the EU and the Western Balkans during the coronavirus crisis and beyond, underlining the region’s strategic importance for the Union. The focus was on a joint response to the crisis and on the common commitment to support the political, economic and social transformation of the region. The EU and Western Balkan leaders adopted the Zagreb Declaration, reconfirming the region’s European perspective, albeit without mentioning enlargement as a process. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, recalled the importance of pursuing reforms in the region, of building a strong democratic framework respectful of the rule of law, and of continuing to fight corruption. The President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, sent a strong message of unity, stressing that the Western Balkans are part of Europe’s future and should be involved in the work of the forthcoming Conference on the Future of Europe.

1. Background

On 23 April 2020, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, [announced](#) that the EU-Western Balkans summit would take place on 6 May as initially planned, despite the coronavirus outbreak, but by video-conference. Holding the planned summit two decades after the [2000 Zagreb EU-Western Balkans summit](#), was, first and foremost, important for the current Croatian Presidency of the Council of the EU, which [regarded](#) this year’s Zagreb summit as the highlight of its first six-month presidency. The summit – the first international event with external counterparts to be attended by [\(almost\)](#) all members of the European Council since the outbreak – allowed EU leaders to give a strong political message to the Western Balkans and signal the importance of the region for the EU at a time when both parties are severely challenged by the coronavirus crisis.

2. Agenda and participation

The summit was preceded by a preparatory meeting held in Brussels on 17 February 2020, which allowed the leaders of the Western Balkan countries, and the Presidents of the European Council, Charles Michel, and the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to consider the main agenda points for the summit. At that time, those [included](#) respect for the rule of law and the fight against organised crime. In the meantime, the coronavirus crisis shifted attention to the health crisis and its economic and societal consequences for both the EU and the Western Balkans, leaving almost no space for the consideration of other policy issues. The commitment to a European perspective for the region, included in the [Zagreb declaration](#), is the main element of continuity between the preparatory meeting and the summit itself.

The summit [brought together](#) the leaders of the EU-27, including the Prime Minister of Croatia, Andrej Plenković, representing the Croatian Presidency of the Council, and of the Western Balkan countries, namely Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and

Serbia, as well as Charles Michel, who chaired the meeting, Ursula von der Leyen, and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell. The meeting was also attended by the President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, while other institutions, including the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Investment Bank were also represented.

3. Main results of the meeting

The summit delivered a message of unity and solidarity between the EU Member States and the Western Balkan countries, confirming the region's strategic importance for the EU. Unity was found not just by placing the Western Balkans in the spotlight for the time of the summit, but through concrete actions, stepped up recently as part of the response to the coronavirus crisis.

Covid-19 joint response

The main focus of the summit was on the joint response to the coronavirus crisis. EU and Western Balkans leaders analysed the immediate response to the health crisis as well as the medium-term action needed to overcome the health, economic and societal aspects of the crisis. President von der Leyen stressed that the crisis had increased the feeling of unity between the EU and the Western Balkans, [praised](#) the support offered by countries in the region in the repatriation of EU citizens, and welcomed contributions pledged at the Coronavirus Global Response pledging conference initiated by the Commission. The High Representative, Josep Borrell, [stressed](#) that it was only by working together that the EU and the Western Balkans could overcome the coronavirus crisis.

The [communication](#) on 'Support to the Western Balkans in tackling Covid-19 and the post-pandemic recovery' represented the European Commission's contribution to the summit, and the basis for the leaders' discussion. The European Commission reaffirmed that the region is an integral part of Europe, and outlined concrete aid measures, including a €3.3 billion short- and longer-term assistance package, intended to address the Covid-19 crisis in the Western Balkan region. Both parties have [acknowledged](#) that aid and support provided by the EU 'goes far beyond what any other partner has provided' to the region. The Zagreb declaration adds that the EU is 'determined to intensify its engagement at all levels' in the longer term. The European Commission is expected to present a recovery plan later this year, funded under the EU's 2021-2027 long-term budget (MFF), which is still under negotiation.

President von der Leyen stressed that the Western Balkans have been [associated](#) with programmes, including the Joint Procurement Initiative to buy medical supplies, usually only open to EU Member States. By doing so, the EU not only confirmed the strategic importance of the Western Balkans, but also applied the new [methodology](#) for enlargement which allows 'phasing in' to EU programmes.

Messages from the European Parliament President

President Sassoli [praised](#) the support received by the EU from the Western Balkan countries 'in combating the coronavirus', and stressed the amount of €3.3 billion in aid provided to the region by the EU, of which €38 million is immediate assistance to the public-health sector.

European perspective of the Western Balkans

The EU leaders reaffirmed their support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans through the Zagreb declaration. The declaration, similar to the Sofia declaration adopted in 2018, does not include the word 'enlargement', a sign of persistent sensitivity on this topic among EU Member States. This development is fully in line with previous European Council conclusions, which in [2017](#) and [2018](#), also mentioned a European perspective for the Western Balkans without mentioning the word 'enlargement', this despite an attempt by the then European Council President, Donald Tusk, to push for more clarity.

A reference to enlargement as a process, and not as a political end-point, was made in the European Council conclusions of [October 2019](#). At the time, the European Council was faced with deadlock

and no progress could be made on greenlighting the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. In the interim, the introduction of a new enlargement methodology in February 2020 allowed the deadlock to be overcome, and, as of March 2020, the two countries have been invited to open accession negotiations. This is a recognition of progress made on reforms by the two countries, progress noted several times since 2018 by the European Commission in its reports. It is also, in the case of North Macedonia, a recognition of the normalisation of relations with Greece, through the ratification of the Prespa Agreement, and with Bulgaria, following the ratification of a friendship treaty. In the latter case, hiccups are not to be excluded, as Bulgaria could be tempted [to delay](#) the actual date of the start of pre-accession negotiations with North Macedonia pending the result of the work of the mixed history committee mandated to consider the common history of the two countries.

Prime Minister Plenković rightly noted that enlargement was a [lengthy process](#) and that, 20 years back, at the first Zagreb EU-Western Balkans summit, his country, Croatia, was among those aspiring to full membership. He stressed that, for the Western Balkan countries, the natural path is to join the EU and added that, from Croatia's perspective, the decision to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia had 'taken too long'. Despite this recent critical step of the EU with respect to the Western Balkans, the opening of accession negotiations with the two countries is not mentioned in the Zagreb declaration. The North Macedonian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nikola Dimitrov, [said](#) that he would have wished for more clarity and 'been even happier with a reference to enlargement or completion of the European Union'.

The Western Balkan states are at different stages in the enlargement process, some – Montenegro and Serbia – are well advanced in their accession negotiations whilst others – Albania and North Macedonia – are to open accession negotiations in the months to come. Two other countries from the region, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, are further behind. Prime Minister Plenković [said](#) that Bosnia and Herzegovina 'deserved to be granted candidate country status. The Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez – the first ever Spanish Prime Minister [to attend](#), under a [carefully negotiated framework](#), a European summit at which Kosovo was represented – [encouraged](#) both Serbia and Kosovo to make progress in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, which is an essential element in allowing both parties to move forward on their respective enlargement paths.

Messages from the European Parliament President

President Sassoli praised enlargement as 'one of the EU's greatest triumphs' and wished to assure the Western Balkan partners of the European Parliament's intention 'to remain a reliable partner standing alongside candidate countries'. He stressed that the EP had welcomed the decision to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, and referred to the Speakers' Summit he had organised in January 2020 in Brussels with the speakers of the Western Balkan parliaments.

EU values and norms and the continuation of reforms

An essential part of the discussion focused on the respect of EU values and norms, on democratic institution-building and on the continuation of reforms. The new enlargement methodology strengthened the political dimension of the process and has introduced a [reversibility mechanism](#) in case of stagnation or backsliding in the reform process, in particular on rule-of-law-related reforms. President Michel recalled the importance of preserving the rule of law, and stressed the need to continue the fight against corruption. President von der Leyen [mentioned](#) freedom of the press, which she qualified as 'a cornerstone of democracy and in Europe's DNA'. She warned that a 'strong and free press' was the best rampart against disinformation.

Messages from the European Parliament President

President Sassoli warned that the 'more political nature' of the new enlargement methodology 'must not undermine the EU's commitment to step-by-step accession on the basis of the individual merits of each candidate country'.

4. The Zagreb declaration and its Sofia predecessor

The [Zagreb declaration](#) is in many points similar to the [Sofia declaration](#) adopted in 2018. At the political level, both declarations confirmed the European perspective of the Western Balkans, while neither of them mentioned enlargement. With respect to the guiding principles, both declarations speak about unity and solidarity, whilst expressing attachment to European values and principles, including to the rule of law, democracy, good governance, good neighbourly relations, and political, economic and societal transformation of the region. As regards policy priorities, most of those mentioned in the Sofia declaration – economics, connectivity, counter-terrorism, foreign and security policy, migration, countering disinformation and hybrid threats – were confirmed in the Zagreb declaration. A notable difference, due to the coronavirus outbreak, is the high profile of the health dimension in the Zagreb declaration, an aspect absent from the Sofia declaration.

Another common point of the Zagreb and Sofia declarations is their timeliness, reflecting the exceptional circumstances under which the respective summit declarations were adopted. The Sofia summit took place at a moment when there was a [real risk](#) for the Western Balkans to depart from their European path due to domestic political fragility, an accumulated fatigue among the population with uncertainty about the European perspective for the region, and mounting [external interference](#), in particular from China, Russia and Saudi Arabia. Some of these fragilities persist, and the coronavirus crisis, with its horizontal impact on all government policies, could have deepened them; hence the importance of maintaining the Zagreb summit, even in the video-conference format.

5. The way forward

Prime Minister Plenković expressed the wish that the pattern of EU-Western Balkan summits be continued and that another summit be organised in two years' time. In the interim, the next major step in EU-Western Balkan relations will be the beginning of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. The European Commission is to prepare the negotiating framework in view of its adoption by the Council. The start of accession negotiations is dependent on continued delivery of reforms and, in the case of North Macedonia, on the successful implementation of good neighbourly agreements, in particular the friendship treaty with Bulgaria.

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