

# Declaration of a European Balkans Partnership

The Balkans are back on the European agenda, bringing the possibility of more sincere relations and a new partnership. After years of dangerous neglect, rising authoritarianism and destructive meddling by external powers, the European Union (EU) has recently realized the urgency of revitalizing reforms and completing the Union in the Western Balkans. To transform attention into success, more concerted effort, involving a new European Balkans Partnership, is needed. The EU and the Western Balkans are intrinsically bound together culturally, politically and socio-economically, through mutual dependency and human ties, and a shared past and hopes for the future.

A decade ago, the European Fund of the Balkans was set up to strengthen democracy, foster European integration and affirm the role of the Western Balkans in addressing Europe's emerging challenges. Since 2008, the EU and the WB have changed significantly as they have undergone various crises. Europe's normative foundations have been challenged, while in the Western Balkans authoritarian tendencies have emerged once again. Some Western Balkans countries have made formal progress towards EU membership while others are still lagging behind. The full democratic transformation of the region thus awaits completion. These challenges should be embraced as an opportunity to continue building a common European Balkan partnership with the aim of full EU membership for all countries of the region. Building on the report of the International Commission on the Balkans, *The Balkans in Europe's Future*, this Declaration paves the way for the next ten years, which will be crucial for the transformation of the WB.

A hundred years after the end of World War I, 2018 should mark a turning point. The new strategy of the European Commission and the Western Balkans summit in Sofia in May 2018 are evidence of the EU's commitment in this regard.

EU accession is not a goal in itself, but an opportunity to fully transform the Balkans. The incentives and rewards of EU integration need to be reviewed and renewed: conditionality based on European values needs to be revitalized. The EU's approach must be clear, immediate and attractive if conditions are to be sufficiently strict. If region seizes the opportunity, it can become part of the EU and converge democratically, socially and economically. However, if this opportunity is missed, the Western Balkans risks remaining distant from the EU, leaving the region without a clear direction and exposed to further instability.

A European Balkans Partnership must be based on a more sincere and transparent relationship, which prioritizes democratic transformation. The Commission strategy is a positive first step, but it is necessary to develop it into a more demanding engagement with the governments and societies of the region. Meanwhile, the political leadership within the region needs to regain credibility by committing to real transformation.

EU membership is not a matter of political convenience, but a generational political and socio-economic choice. The EU today does not need just any kind of enlargement: it needs genuine commitment by both the EU and the Western Balkans. Rule of law, good governance, freedom of expression, gender equality and clear division of power are essential prerequisites of accession, which would make democratic transformation of the Balkans resilient. To this end, we call for new togetherness between EU and the Balkans based on a four-pronged strategy: more vigorous EU engagement with the Balkans; more systematic efforts to promote a culture of learning and training through all levels of education in order to advance human capital; an honest and lasting regional rapprochement; and a tailor-made vision of closer cooperation in various EU policy areas.

Accession negotiations should not merely involve institutional dialogue between EU institutions and the governments of the region. The new European Balkan Partnership requires more than EU accession: it requires a shared understanding of Europe's future and of the role of the Balkans in the future EU.

The democratic legitimacy of the future EU must be based on broader engagement of the citizens in the accession process and a positive, constructive inclusion of civil society organizations, emancipatory grassroots movements and political oppositions. All Europeans share a common future. All citizens of EU member states and potential member states should therefore contribute to consultations on the EU's future. Renewing and reconstructing the EU on the basis of more unity, solidarity and shared responsibility is essential. The more progress is made with the Union in the next few years, the more secure the future both of the Western Balkans and of Europe as a whole. The Balkans need to become part of this joint European debate.

Regional cooperation is not an externally imposed condition but the prerequisite of rediscovering common interests and forming a new regional identity within the EU. Regional rapprochement should be based on the EU's founding values: lasting resolution of bilateral disputes to overcome the legacies of war and conflict, and reconciliation between citizens.

Enlargement reconfirms the founding values of the Union. With this Declaration, we are calling for the reunification of Europe. A Europe without divisions between Us and Them, but a Europe of all its citizens. This Partnership aims to facilitate this reunification and to fulfil the dream of a European continent of peace. European values are fundamental and appealing to all Europeans living in the Balkans. However, past experience has taught us that they cannot be taken for granted neither in the EU nor in the Western Balkans countries and that we all must fight for them more fervently than we did until now.

Together, the EU and the Balkans can truly consolidate Europe as an area of peace, democracy and security and can contribute to a common future based on solidarity, responsibility, pluralism and tolerance. A new vision is necessary that goes beyond the well-known existing – largely technocratic – solutions. We wish to reimagine the region as embedded in the EU in order to overcome its longstanding marginal position, the sense of being not subjects but objects of Europe. We want to focus on the fundamentals and to spark a new narrative of a European Balkans. We desire a shared European future for the Balkans. Setting this as our joint objective, we hereby declare our readiness to contribute personally to accomplishing this common European vision.

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*Nathalie Tocci  
Vesna Pusic  
Werner Weidenfeld  
Goran Svilanovic  
Jacques Rupnik  
Michael Schaefer  
Pierre Mirel  
Heather Grabbe  
Sonja Licht  
Stefan Lehne  
Ivan Krastev  
Rosa Balfour  
Ivan Vejvoda  
Wolfgang Petritsch  
Radovan Jelasic  
Erhard Busek*

*Hannes Swoboda  
Karel Schwarzenberg  
Michael Leigh  
Steven Blockmans  
Samuel Zbogor  
Wolfgang Ischinger  
Florian Bieber  
Hedvig Morvai  
Igor Bandovic  
Srdjan Majstorovic  
Milica Delević  
Adnan Cerimagic  
Elena Stavrevska  
Florence Gaub  
Peter Grk  
Remzi Lani*

*Kristof Bender  
Chiara Milan  
Milica Uvalic  
Dejan Jović  
Dane Taleski  
Blerjana Bino  
Shpend Emini  
Marika Djolai  
Vedran Džihic  
Marko Kmezić  
Jovana Marović  
Corina Stratulat  
Tobias Flessenkemper  
Zoran Nechev  
Eleonora Poli  
Milan Nič*