



## **Skopje Declaration**

We, the leaders of the Brdo Brijuni Process, guided by the principles of regional cooperation, democracy, and sustainable development, have met in Skopje on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2023, to recognize and emphasize the critical importance of accelerating the process of EU integration of the Western Balkans, the need to adapt to the effects of climate change, and to discuss measures ensuring vitality of societies by retaining young people within the Western Balkans region. In pursuit of a prosperous and secure future for the Western Balkans as the precondition to prosperity and stability of Europe as a whole, we underline the following:

### **Accelerating the Process of EU accession:**

We pledge, by reiterating our position on the EU enlargement policy and European Union membership perspective of the Western Balkans as the most direct contributor to the maintenance of peace and stability, and more than ever a geopolitical issue, to intensify the strategic dialogue with the EU institutions with the aim of speeding up the EU accession process and prevent the region being left behind. Both the EU as well as the Western Balkans should be ready for the enlargement, as soon as possible, but not later than 2030 in order to achieve this goal.

In view of the continuous Russian aggression against Ukraine and its spillover effect in the Western Balkans, we reiterate the necessity of a strong, resilient, and inclusive EU, with the Western Balkans as part of it.

We acknowledge that comprehensive political, economic, and social reforms are crucial for EU accession. We commit to intensify our efforts in implementing reforms in the Western Balkans aimed at enhancing the rule of law, prosperity, the functioning of democratic institutions, and public administration.

We confirm that regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations are essential for advancing respective EU paths. We pledge to work together to foster an atmosphere of mutual trust, understanding, peaceful and lasting resolution of remaining bilateral issues and solidarity among each other.

We underline the significance of reaching tangible benefits and opportunities for citizens of Western Balkans even before the formal accession. We therefore invite the EU to consider opening pathways that will enable the Western Balkans to explore opportunities by accessing specific EU policies, initiatives, and funds and bring some of the benefits of EU membership to the people of the Western Balkans already today.

In this regard, we emphasize the urgency of utilizing the new negotiations methodology to expedite the merit-based EU accession process and to further advance the gradual integration between the EU and the region already during the enlargement process itself.

### **Combating the Effects of Climate Change and mitigating its effects:**

Recognizing the urgent need to adapt to the growing threats of climate change for the region, we acknowledge that adaptation to climate change is a shared responsibility, requiring collaborative efforts by our governments, civil society, private sector, and international partners. These efforts shall be coordinated with the EU and its related programs.



Tackling climate change challenges, pursuing green transition and fostering green growth coupled with enhancing energy diversification and transition to renewable energy generation and efficiency should be further promoted. We commit to accelerating the transition to renewable energy sources and increasing energy efficiency to reduce our carbon footprint and ensure a sustainable energy future. This can include environmentally sound investments in hydro, solar, wind and geothermal sources.

We welcome the Energy Support Package of €1 billion for the Western Balkans by which the EU extended the same solidarity measures that had been taken inside the EU following Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine, such as supporting vulnerable households and building new energy infrastructure.

Recognizing the richness of our natural landscapes and biodiversity, we will work together to preserve and protect our unique ecosystems and promote sustainable land use practices.

We will support investments in climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable infrastructure and disaster preparedness measures to safeguard our societies from the impacts of extreme weather events. The floods that hit Slovenia and Croatia this year, as well as the wildfires across the region are all testaments on the necessity to work together and help each other tackle common challenges. Solidarity is a value that has always been an integral part of our co-operation. In this spirit, we encourage the designing and the use of good practices, including through European mechanisms in co-ordination assistance at both bilateral and multilateral levels, to make sure that help is always at hand to those who need it most.

### **Retaining the Youth within the Western Balkans:**

The emigration of young people from the Western Balkans has significant implications for long-term vitality of our societies, for sustainable economic growth and, social progress. We recognize the critical importance of nurturing and retaining the youth within the Western Balkans. We firmly believe that harnessing the potential of the youth is crucial for advancing our societies and driving long-term prosperity.

We emphasize the importance of EU collaboration and support in retaining the youth in the region. The EU's engagement and partnership are pivotal in ensuring the successful implementation of strategies aimed at nurturing and harnessing the potential of youth.

We celebrate the diversity of the Western Balkans region and pledge to promote cultural exchange and understanding among the youth. By fostering inclusive and open societies, we aim to create an environment that encourages young individuals to stay or return and contribute to collective development of the region.

We recognize the importance of quality education. We will work towards improving educational systems and increasing opportunities for the youth to acquire relevant competencies and skills.

We commit to creating an attractive and competitive business environment that encourages innovation, entrepreneurship, and job creation, thus retaining the youth within the region.

We confirm that cooperation in these fields is essential for enhancing human capital development, stopping brain drain and encouraging brain circulation, as well as fostering the development of a long-term sustainable innovative ecosystem and the transition to a knowledge-based economy, thus providing better perspectives for the youth in the region.