

**Göttweig Declaration**  
**by the**  
**“Friends of the Western Balkans”**

**23 June 2023**

Twenty years ago, at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki of 21 June 2003, the EU declared that the future of the Western Balkans lies within the EU. This unequivocal support for the European integration of this region was underpinned by the Thessaloniki Agenda for a privileged relationship and deepened, concrete cooperation. It included goals such as promoting political dialogue and co-operation in the area of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the opening of EU programmes and agencies as well as enhanced financial support.

Since then, significant progress has been achieved in the EU-Western Balkans relations and on the path to EU accession. In 2022, major milestones were reached, such as the start of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, the granting of candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina and the approval of visa liberalisation for Kosovo\*.

Nevertheless, we consider the enlargement process to be too slow and sometimes too complex and bureaucratic. It has not produced as many visible and tangible results as citizens of the Western Balkans, in particular young people, might have expected, leading to disappointment and alienation from the EU.

At the same time, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine poses a systemic and security challenge to both the EU and the Western Balkans. The region is exposed to destabilizing factors such as malign third-party influence, hybrid threats, disinformation and illegal migration.

Moreover, recent violent events in the north of Kosovo have shown that unresolved past tensions and ongoing disputes can still undermine stability from within.

We cannot afford instability in this region, which is surrounded by EU Member States. Therefore, it is vital that the EU makes full use of the enlargement policy also as a geostrategic tool. Especially since history has shown that EU membership is a catalyst for overcoming bilateral or regional conflicts, fostering reconciliation and internal reforms.

Twenty years after the Summit of Thessaloniki, we, the **“Friends of the Western Balkans”**, reconfirm our full and unequivocal commitment to the future EU membership of the region. We share a special responsibility for keeping the Western Balkans high on the EU’s political agenda and for supporting the region’s EU path.

Therefore, we call for renewed vigour and acceleration of the accession process. This goal should also be achieved by further advancing the gradual integration between the European Union and the region, as tasked by the European Council of 23-24 June 2022. In this context, we welcome the recently announced growth plan for the Western Balkans by the President of the European Commission that seeks to closer associate the region to the EU Single Market, deepen economic regional integration, accelerate fundamental reforms and increase the pre-accession funds.

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

We call on the EU institutions to present a **clear agenda for gradual and accelerated integration with concrete implementation steps until 2024 and beyond**, based on fair and rigorous conditionality and the principle of own merits. Special emphasis should be placed on areas that can bring tangible benefits to the citizens of the Western Balkans.

This agenda should also give fresh impetus for **deeper cooperation in the field of the Common Foreign and Security Policy** and establish a more regular and structured exchange with our partners. We propose to

- invite our Western Balkans colleagues to Foreign Affairs Council and Gymnich meetings at least twice a year;
- have a regular strategic debate on the Western Balkans at the Foreign Affairs Council at least twice a year;
- increase the EU's presence and visibility in the region through more frequent and coordinated Ministerial visits, also on behalf of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy;
- establish a regular exchange with the EU's Political and Security Committee in order to discuss issues of common interest and reach mutual understanding;
- increase the number of expert dialogues to support the region's security and resilience, e.g. in the fight of organized crime and illegal migration.

Since we expect our partners to align themselves with EU foreign policy, we believe such enhanced dialogue would deepen their understanding of EU positions. It would make us more effective in facing external pressures and countering Russian and other harmful narratives in the region that are incompatible with EU values and a rules-based international order.

We, the "Friends of the Western Balkans", are committed to driving forward an agenda for a deeper partnership and joint ownership. We want to see our Western Balkans partners at the EU table as often as possible, be it formally or informally, as participants or observers. We invite other EU colleagues and EU institutions to engage in concrete and visible action in order to pursue the shared goal of full EU membership for our Western Balkans partners with increased determination.

The Foreign Ministers of Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Greece, Italy, Slovakia, Slovenia:

