



WHAT'S THE STORY? THE DECEMBER GLORY OF THE WESTERN BALKANS FOR THE EU-WESTERN BALKANS SUMMIT

KLODIANA BESHKU

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The European Union–Western Balkan Summit that took place on December 6, 2022, in Tirana represented a significant milestone for the Balkan Region. “I must modestly say that we have played our part to come to this turning point and have given a series of proofs that we are ready to be evaluated and considered differently, and here I mean not just Albania, but the Western Balkans as a whole,” said Albania’s prime Minister Edi Rama in a press conference a day before the Summit.¹ The enthusiasm of being the host country of such an important event (the first ever in the Western Balkans) was contagious in Albania. In a country of only 110 years of which around 45 years were spent in isolation due to the communist regime, these kinds of events are perceived with a touch of “magic”. The atmosphere recalled the fervor with which the first US Secretary General James Baker was received in a just opened to the world Albania in July 1990: People overcrowded the streets to welcome him in a spontaneous sit-in to be long remembered.

As soon as the news about Albania hosting the Summit of the Berlin Process on the 6th of December spread, they were clouded by other news, aiming to eclipse the event. In particular, the Albanian opposition’s announcement of a protest and the news that the Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić was not going to take part. In the end, only a dim opposition protest took place and the Serbian president decided to participate at the very last moment.² Surprisingly, it was the prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, who was the biggest absentee of the event.

Another surprising part of the Summit was a short live show of traditional Albanian dances followed by the Traviata Libiamo Aria and children breakdancing. This performance, set in the Italia square of Tirana, symbolically represented the tradition, the classical and the future. It was an outdoor performance so unusual for these kinds of high-level Summits. “You are an outstanding host,” said the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to the Albanian prime Minister Edi Rama praising the country’s effort to organize an extraordinary Summit. Nevertheless, the greatest significance of the Summit lies in the symbolism of choosing Albania – the most pro EU country of the region – as the host country for this event and in the Tirana Declaration that the summit generated.

¹ <https://euronews.al/en/tirana-was-not-chosen-by-chance-rama-ahead-of-the-summit-we-played-our-role-to-arrive-here/>

² <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/12/05/serbian-president-will-attend-eu-balkan-summit-in-tirana/>

The EU–Western Balkans Summits result from the implementation of the European Council’s 2019–2024 Strategic Agenda,³ which after the Russian aggression against Ukraine, has become even more strategic. Choosing Albania as a location for the Summit, after Brussels, gives a clear message that the Western Balkans represents an EU sphere of influence in a highly geopolitically tense atmosphere that the war has created. “It was a Summit where there was a very clear message of unity” stressed the President von der Leyen in her speech.⁴ “The choice is very clear: We have to look in the same direction together,” said the President of the European Council Charles Michel in his speech.⁵ On the other hand, von der Leyen said in front of the reporters that all the countries had to choose sides in the current chess field. “We (the EU) are the largest investor. We are the closest partner, and that is why the discussion is also about you having to decide which side you are on, the side of democracy”.⁶ She insisted that it is crucial to follow the struggle between autocracies and democracies and that “this struggle is also noticeable in the Western Balkans” where Russia and China are trying to exert their influence.⁷ Most probably these declarations were a call for Serbia, a country that has not aligned with the EU’s sanctions, following Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.

The Tirana Declaration⁸ is the most important outcome of the Summit, it is one of the clearest documents produced by EU diplomacy. It announced the need for acceleration of the European integration of the Western Balkan countries and relaunched its enlargement policy towards the region after a three-year stall (the French veto to the opening of the access negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in October 2019). “A new package of 400 million EUR to finance 12 investment projects” mainly in the renewable energy camp was announced during the Summit. Regarding this, the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama mentioned the importance of an energy support package, which will help the region “distance itself from Russian influence.” In his final speech, Rama went further by asking the European Union to think of creating a program similar to the Marshall Plan for the region – “a tangible European Renewal Program” for the whole European continent.⁹ He praised the new European Political Community that was launched at the Prague Summit in October 2022, while Commissioner Von der Leyen had greeted the achievements done under the Common Regional Market of the Berlin Process and “the agreements that underline the importance of the freedom to travel, to study or to work”.¹⁰ For one day the Brussels’ gaze was fixed at the Western Balkans and with no doubt, this EU–Western Balkan Summit signified a revitalization of the enlargement towards the Western Balkans and thus, constitute a turning point in the EU’s approach towards the region with the first concrete result already delivered: Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate country to the EU only a week after this Summit¹¹.

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3 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/eu-strategic-agenda-2019-2024/>

4 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_22_7527

5 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/12/06/remarks-by-president-charles-michel-following-the-eu-western-balkans-summit-in-tirana/>

6 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/western-balkans-welcome-eus-geo-strategic-enlargement-shift-amid-ukraine-war/>

7 <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-western-balkans-summit-accession-is-a-two-way-street/a-64008301>

8 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/12/06/tirana-declaration-6-december-2022/>

9 <https://www.kryeministria.al/en/newsroom/fjala-e-miresearchdjes-ne-samit/>

10 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_22_7527

11 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/bosnia-herzegovina/>