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Press release

Final Declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans

A hundred years after the outbreak of the First World War, the heads of government, foreign ministers and economics ministers of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, the FYR of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia, as well as representatives of the European Commission, the future host Austria, and France, met in Berlin on 28 August 2014 for the first Conference on the Western Balkans.

2014 – 2018: four years of real progress

1. We agree that today's conference should provide a framework for a period of four years, during which we will further our endeavours to make additional real progress in the reform process, in resolving outstanding bilateral and internal issues, and in achieving reconciliation within and between the societies in the region. We are also united in the aim of enhancing regional economic cooperation and laying the foundations for sustainable growth.
2. We have jointly decided to meet in the same format each year during the next four years in order to implement the agenda agreed at today's meeting and to support this aim through other specific projects. The Federal Chancellor of Austria has offered to host the first follow-up conference in his country in 2015. This will provide an opportunity to evaluate the initial results. We plan to continue our work on questions of key importance to the future of the Western Balkans on an ongoing basis during further conferences to be held until 2018.

The path to a future in Europe

3. Just fifteen years ago, the news from the region was dominated by war, expulsions and destruction. It is now apparent that the region has already made great achievements as regards creating stability, developing good neighbourly relations, and modernising government, society and the economy.
4. The European Union's enlargement policy has played a crucial role in these achievements. All of the countries in the Western Balkans firmly believe that their future lies in the European Union.
5. The German Government expressly underlines its support for the prospect of European integration for the countries of the Western Balkans. All of the countries of the Western Balkans will have an opportunity to join the European Union if they meet the conditions for accession. Germany is aware of its responsibility for a peaceful, stable and democratic future based on the rule of law, and will continue to support the region on its path to this future.

Intensifying regional cooperation as an essential basis

6. All of the participants underline the need to resolve outstanding bilateral questions as quickly as possible in the interests of good neighbourly relations and increased stability in the region. The prime ministers of Serbia and Kosovo reiterated their determination to revitalise the process of normalising relations. The naming dispute between the FYR of Macedonia and Greece is one of the outstanding bilateral issues. The participating States agreed that this dispute must urgently be resolved by a willingness to compromise on all sides. Where possible, the countries should make use of the positive influence of regional neighbours on overcoming internal political challenges. This applies in particular to the revitalisation of the reform process in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

7. The countries of the Western Balkans therefore stress their willingness today to increase their cooperation among one another. Regional organisations such as the Regional Cooperation Council will play an important role in this.
8. Regional cooperation shall also include the civil society level. In this context, the participating States underlined their unanimous wish to expand transnational exchange, particularly among young people

Strengthening good governance

9. Further improving governance remains a particular challenge for the young democracies of the Western Balkans.
10. The participating States agree that further measures must be taken to tackle corruption and organised crime. The countries of the Western Balkans reiterated their willingness to carry out further reforms aimed at increasing legal certainty in their countries, to uphold and reinforce the independence of their judiciary, and to work more intensively together across borders in regional and bilateral structures.
11. In a pluralistic democracy, the opposition must also be able to play its role in the parliamentary framework, and it must also want to do so. A politically active civil society can also provide constructive support as regards the further strengthening of democratic communities in the countries of the Western Balkans, thus also bringing these states closer to the EU. The prerequisites for this include a pluralistic media landscape, independent trade unions, and an economy that can fulfil its role as part of the community, free from political interference. Germany remains committed to fostering freedom of the media in the region. To this end, the Federal Foreign Office is holding a workshop for twelve leading journalists from all countries of the region as part of the conference framework programme.

Increasing prosperity via sustainable economic growth

12. Sustainable economic growth and thus the sustainable increase of prosperity for the good of citizens will only be possible via open markets and foreign investment. A positive investment climate is particularly crucial to the activities of small and medium-sized enterprises. Legal certainty and a zero-tolerance policy on corruption are vital in this context. The participating States aim to improve cooperation among the investment agencies, as well as the way they communicate with Germany Trade & Invest
 13. The countries of the Western Balkans shall reinforce their endeavours to overcome their current account deficits. German business will support the enhancement of the region's export strength by launching a purchasing initiative for the Western Balkans in 2015.
 14. Competitiveness must be further increased via regional value chains. In this context, the initiative by the German business community to hold a regional conference in Montenegro in September 2014 and the activities by the Regional Cooperation Council in this area will make a concrete contribution.
 15. The participating States agree that European energy policy is of increasing importance to the countries of the Western Balkans. Regional cooperation within the framework of the Energy Community for South East Europe is an important component, particularly as regards energy security, energy efficiency targets and climate protection. The countries of the Western Balkans will continue to work intensively on further developing the Energy Community and on overcoming shortcomings in implementation.
 16. The participating States share the view that a transport community for the Western Balkans could provide a positive impetus for economic development by improving the region's logistical connections to the European markets where demand is high. This is also the case as regards the expansion of information and communications technology infrastructure under reliable conditions.
 17. The participating States believe that needs-based academic and vocational training is essential in order to reduce youth unemployment. Projects by the German business community to support vocational training in the countries of the Western Balkans are helping to meet this aim.
 18. Germany is willing to carry out further measures within the framework of existing programmes on economic cooperation and development in order to support the region's countries in making the most effective use of European measures for bringing them closer to the EU via the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). German development cooperation has provided reliable support to the countries of the Western Balkans for 25 years and is an integral part of German endeavours to bring the countries closer to the EU and European standards.
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