

# Remarks by President Donald Tusk after the EU-Western Balkans summit

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Good afternoon. Before anything else, let me thank Prime Minister Borissov and his whole team; you did something excellent and I am really impressed when it comes to your effectiveness, determination, and mainly because of your engagement we can say today that the summit was successful, and of course thank you for the wonderful Bulgarian hospitality. *Blagodaria Boyko, blagodaria prelestna Bulgaria* (thank you Boyko, thank you beautiful Bulgaria)

We have just concluded a very good and fruitful EU-Western Balkans summit. I believe that it took us too long since our last meeting in Thessaloniki fifteen years ago, and this is why we decided to meet again in two years in Croatia. This is the best illustration that the integration with the Western Balkans is a top priority for the EU.

Today we reaffirmed our mutual commitment to the European perspective for the whole region. As I said during my recent visit to the region, the European Union is and will remain the most reliable partner of the entire Western Balkans.

And in very concrete terms we discussed how to improve connections with and within the Western Balkans region. We are speaking about human, economic, digital and infrastructure connections. The package of measures we signed a while ago – the so-called “Sofia Priority Agenda” – adds new initiatives to our current cooperation. For example, we agreed to double the Erasmus+ to allow more youth to study in the EU. We agreed to work towards the lowering of roaming charges and we agreed to create more favourable conditions for private investments by providing better bank guarantees.

And to avoid any confusion, let me be very clear: The connectivity agenda is neither an alternative nor a substitute for enlargement. It is a way to use the time between today and tomorrow more effectively than before, so that our citizens and businesses are not waiting for all the benefits of EU integration. Because I don't see any other future for the Western Balkans than the EU. There is no other alternative, there is no plan B. The Western Balkans are an integral part of Europe and they belong to our community.

Before concluding let me very briefly comment on EU leaders' meeting yesterday evening.

We agreed that the EU will step up its efforts on digital and innovation in order to rise to the challenge of technological revolution. You should expect very concrete decisions when we formally meet in June. They will include elements like the establishment of a European Innovation Council in the next MFF, pilot projects including for Artificial Intelligence and more funds for investments. All this will be based on our European values, including full respect of citizens' privacy, also online.

As to the Iran Nuclear Deal we agreed unanimously that the EU will stay in the agreement as long as Iran remains fully committed to it. Additionally the Commission was given a green light to be ready to act whenever European interest are affected.

inally on EU-US trade. Also here, we have achieved a united approach that will strengthen the Commission in its ongoing negotiations with the United States. The EU is even ready to talk about trade liberalisation with our American friends but only if the US decides an unlimited exemption from steel and aluminium tariffs. President Juncker will present our approach in more detail. Thank you.

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