

SEECP SKOPJE SUMMIT DECLARATION

Skopje, June 2024

Under the Chairpersonship of President Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, we, the Participants to the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) Summit, President Jakov Milatovic, President Vljosa Osmani-Sadriu, Chairman of Presidency Denis Becirovic, President Bajram Begaj, Minister of Foreign Affairs Hakan Fidan, Minister of Foreign Affairs Georgios Gerapetritis, Minister of Foreign Affairs Marko Djuric, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivan Kondov, State Secretary Daniela Gitman, State Secretary Serghei Mihov, State Secretary Frano Matusic, Ambassador Gregor Presker, ensuing our meeting in Skopje,

In the presence of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Secretary General, Mrs. Majlinda Bregu, and representatives of the European External Action Service and the European Commission,

Have met in Skopje on 13th June 2024,

REAFFIRMING our strong commitment to the founding principles of the SEECP Charter, the UN Charter, as well as to the relevant documents of the EU, OSCE and the Council of Europe;

CONTINUING to emphasize the inclusive role and the commitment of South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) as the main political platform for regional cooperation, based on principles of equality, inclusivity and regional ownership; underscoring its potential to streamline regional efforts in achieving common goals such as enabling greater economic growth, which is an important prerequisite of security, stability and prosperity;

STRESSING our adherence to the values and principles of democracy, rule of law, respect for International Law, respect and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, solidarity, inclusiveness and equality in these challenging times;

REITERATING our dedication to good-neighbourly relations and inclusive regional cooperation that contributes to successful merit-based integration of the region, as a cornerstone for prosperity and stability, as well as for the overall development of the region and wellbeing of our citizens;

ENHANCING reconciliation and trust-building, regional cooperation and accelerated merit-based EU accession process, and the implementation of SDGs in SEE in line with SEE 2030 Strategy, we encourage strengthening regional people-to-people connections and the full realisation in unleashing of economic potential as an essential element in bringing the entire SEE region closer to joining the EU;

RECALLING that the SEE 2030 Strategy, which was adopted in Antalya (2021), unites the 13 SEECP Participants of the SEE region in their quest for achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals across three dimensions: prosperity, people and peace and partnerships, maintaining sustainable economic growth by decreasing poverty and inequality, women empowerment, social inclusion, decreasing the SEE region's depopulation by improving the quality of life for young people and speeding up the Green and Digital transition, as necessary elements for further progress;

RECOGNISING that the effective and sustainable implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans is crucial for the region, we emphasize the importance of timely and on-track execution, adaptability to the evolving environmental landscape, and the integration of lessons learned to ensure a sustainable and resilient future for the region;

UNDERLINING the significance of the implementation of sustainable development goals in accordance with the SEE 2030 Strategy, the current Common Regional Market (CRM) Action Plan and enhancement of SEE economies, in line with EU rules and standards, as a stepping stone towards inclusion into the EU Single Market;

STRESSING that the Participants in the South East European Cooperation Process remain fully committed to further promoting and maintaining regional stability, to broadening and upgrading our cooperation and coordination, effectively addressing different threats, both at strategic and operational level, enhancing information exchange mechanisms and our operational cooperation in fighting all forms of organised crime;

WORKING together in finding sustainable solutions in cultural and creative industries, digitisation and green solutions, good practices and innovative models of sustainability;

Have agreed the following:

1. EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS

I. We share a vision for the future that involves common values and mutual responsibilities as we deepen our integration and accelerate the EU accession process.

II. We acknowledge that enlargement is a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity. It is vital that we redouble our efforts to communicate the positive effects of enlargement, underline the necessity to deliver on internal reforms, enhance regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations and make swift and sustained progress towards EU membership through credible reforms, considering it crucial for the citizens of the region.

III. We support the renewed momentum on enlargement, which provides aspiring SEECF Participants the drive to move forward on their EU path, in line with the merit-based principle. We believe that considerable progress both in political and economic spheres needs to be stepped up, as the SEE region holds significant potential for economic growth and stability.

IV. We underline the continued commitment to the Rule of Law and Human Rights of all SEECF Participants and stress the importance for EU aspiring SEECF Participants to enhance their reform efforts, notably in the area of Rule of Law and Human Rights, including the rights of persons belonging to vulnerable groups, and the need for fair and rigorous conditionality and the principle of reversibility.

V. We welcome the European Council's decision of 14 December 2023 and 21 March 2024 to open accession negotiations with Kyiv, Chisinau and Sarajevo and to grant candidate status to Tbilisi. We appreciate the European Union's willingness to boost the accession dynamics in the region.

VI. We recognise the SEECF as a regional forum best suited for finding solutions to outstanding issues in the region through dialogue.

VII. We welcome the intensified political dialogue and enhanced policy engagement of the EU with the region, including by means of innovative instruments, such as the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, which should support integration into the EU Single Market and closing the socio-economic gap between the SEE beneficiaries and the EU. These new instruments are critical for addressing current infrastructural shortcomings in SEE and achieving connectivity convergence throughout the enlarged Europe.

VIII. We appreciate the European Union's adoption of the Regulation establishing the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans 2024-2027, aimed at increasing the pace of socio-economic convergence with the EU by promoting enhanced key growth drivers and gradual access to the EU Single Market and increased financial assistance based on the necessary programmes of reforms undertaken by the partners in the region.

IX. We highlight the necessity of EU members from the region to continue to provide support to all EU aspiring SEECP Participants, in particular regarding sharing best practices and experiences in EU integration related reform processes, and promoting the EU perspective of the entire region. Likewise, the more advanced candidates remain committed to sharing their experience and lessons learned in the process, supporting, thus, all partners from the region, and beyond, to progress on the integration path at an accelerated pace.

X. We welcome the EU-Western Balkans Summit held on the 13th of December 2023 in Brussels, which brought additional intensity to the European Union's political engagement with the Western Balkans, supporting their EU accession processes.

XI. We also welcome the signing of the Agreement on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications of Nurses, Veterinary Surgeons, Pharmacists, and Midwives in the Central European Free Trade Agreement Context in the margins of the Berlin Process Summit held in Tirana on 16th of October 2023 bringing the Western Balkans closer to completing the Common Regional Market. We anticipate prompt implementation of all agreements reached within the Berlin Process.

XII. We acknowledge the successful start of the implementation of the EU/WB Roaming Declaration as of 01 October 2023, which is of great importance for citizens in both the EU and Western Balkans. In a positive momentum, it offers significantly reduced data roaming charges, enhancing connectivity and economic interaction.

2. REGIONAL SECURITY IN LIGHT OF GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES

I. We are committed to facing together the complex threats and challenges to security in the SEE region and the rest of Europe, and to upholding and safeguarding democratic values and the International Law.

II. We express concern about the increasingly complex geo-strategic environment that the world is facing, caused by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the current crisis in the Middle East and other possible sources of instability that continue to put European and global security at risk.

III. We strongly condemn Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine as a grave violation of International Law, an attack on a sovereign state and against the foundations of international security and stability. As it has entered its third year, it unites all SEECP Participants in supporting the fundamental importance of maintaining peace, democracy, the Rule of Law and Human Rights as pillars for building together a prosperous SEE region.

IV. We deplore the unprecedented and unacceptable humanitarian catastrophe still unfolding in Gaza. We strongly condemn all attacks causing loss of civilian lives and call for immediate ceasefire, provision of unimpeded, sufficient humanitarian assistance, and reviving the political process to achieve a just and lasting solution based on the two-state solution.

V. We call for implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions inter alia 2720, 2728 and 2735 as well as the preliminary measures indicated by the International Court of Justice.

VI. We are committed to enhance cooperation towards better responding to the challenges emanating from terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, violent extremism, racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism, misuse of new and emerging technologies by terror groups and organised crime networks; and underline the importance of effective exchange of information and coordination between relevant authorities.

VII. The Participants emphasize the increasing significance of cooperation with the EU on security matters, including through regular dialogue in South East Europe, recognising the importance of harmonisation of respective positions and alignment of policies on matters which fall under EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy.

VIII. The evolving role of NATO in South East Europe testifies to its increasing relevance for maintaining security and peace in our region, recognised to be of strategic importance for the Alliance and the region, especially in the current geopolitical context. We will continue to support Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and the reform efforts of aspiring SEECF Participants to fulfil the membership criteria.

IX. **We underline** the need for ever stronger cooperation, managing irregular migration and combating migration related crimes such as migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings. In this regard, we recall the importance of international solidarity and responsibility in burden sharing in the field of migration and refugees as well as exchange of best practices.

X. **We consider** it is of crucial importance to build strong, stable and peaceful societies. We should jointly address the imminent threats, regardless of the causes that create unstable and unpredictable conditions, and react appropriately to the global crisis which affects the regional security infrastructure, enhancing region's resilience for future challenges and threats.

XI. **We reiterate** our strong commitment to a just and sustainable peace by demonstrating unity and strong commitment to the principles within the European family and of the strategic partnership between the EU and SEE region.

3. ADVANCING ECONOMIC COOPERATION AND CONNECTIVITY **(ENERGY, TRANSPORT AND DIGITAL)**

I. The regional economic integration has the potential to boost growth, increase attractiveness and competitiveness, create employment opportunities and address demographic challenges. Aware of the significance of furthering economic cooperation within the South East Europe region, as well as between the region and the EU, the Participants are committed to strengthen partnerships and jointly work on creating favourable and stimulating environment for thriving economic activity for all partners and the region.

II. The energy supply vulnerabilities, as critical component of energy security as well as greater economic and overall development of the region, and commodity supply disruptions after Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine have led us to address the issue of dependency and to improve the resourcefulness and efficiency in energy sector.

III. The environmental challenges posed by climate change are among the most pressing issues faced by South East Europe. We stress the importance of comprehensive and coordinated climate action, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, transitioning to renewable energy sources and recycling to minimise environmental footprint and conserve valuable natural resources.

IV. We underline the importance of better intermodality and interoperability of the transport network for shaping the cross-border/boundary movement of passengers and freight in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way in accordance with the objectives of the European Green Deal, climate policy and the Smart and Sustainable Mobility Strategy.

V. In order to overcome these structural deficiencies, we stress the importance of development of optimised energy networks and hybrid systems which could support the increase of intermittent renewable energy sources by offering increased operational flexibility, investments in hydrogen and renewables.

VI. We welcome the inclusion of the Pan-European Corridor VIII as well as its vertical extensions in the European transport corridor Western Balkans-East Mediterranean, the development of North-South connectivity in the Three Seas region, and the inclusion of Western Balkans-Eastern Mediterranean transport corridor in the TEN-T network, including the introduction of the Adriatic-Ionian branch of the mentioned corridor in the next regular 10-year revision of the TEN-T network. This will further establish

strategic links between transport routes in the entire SEE region and will help towards a more efficient and sustainable economic development, security and resilience of SEE region with the rest of Europe.

VII. The development of a robust digital market in South East Europe is essential in order to increase the competitiveness of regional economies. The Participants remain committed to enhance their policy engagement, to address structural weaknesses via adequate reforms and to build a vibrant business-to-business cooperation in the digital sector by supporting efforts to foster technological innovation, support digitalisation of business and of public services, strengthen the digital skills, boost entrepreneurship, encourage SMEs participation in the digital market, accelerate inward investment and continue participation in regional initiatives, programmes and projects.

4. PARLIAMENTARY DIMENSION

I. We underline the importance of parliamentary cooperation among Participants and the prominent role of the SEECP PA in this respect.

II. We encourage the holding of regular exchanges and further strengthening of cooperation among the parliaments of the SEECP PA, as an important step towards the realisation of better regional cooperation.

III. We appreciate the activities of the SEECP PA and recognise that the close cooperation between the SEECP and the SEECP PA advances regional reforms and strengthens parliamentary democracy in the region.

IV. We encourage continued cooperation in the SEECP PA and adoption of relevant documents, as a means to further promote reconciliation and good neighbourly relations in the SEE region.

V. We acknowledge the outstanding role and the significance of the SEECP PA in enhancing the stability and prosperity of South East Europe.

VI. We welcome and commend the Assembly of North Macedonia for the successful presidency of the SEECP PA and the contribution to the 11th Plenary Session of the SEECP PA, to be held from 18 to 20 June 2024 in Skopje, to further strengthen the role and significance of the SEECP PA and parliamentary diplomacy in the region.

5. SEECP-RCC SYNERGY

I. We highlight the importance of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Secretariat in Sarajevo as the SEECP's operational arm and acknowledge their involvement, dedication, and support in promoting and enhancing connectivity in a political, economic, social and cultural sense.

II. We acknowledge the distinctive role and achievements of the Regional Cooperation Council, guided by the SEECP, in fostering cooperation, regional development, and progress towards a shared future within the European Union. The SEECP will persist in offering direction and guidance to the RCC to enhance convergence, synergy, and effectiveness in our joint endeavours to transform the region into a zone of prosperity and stability, through improved regional cooperation.

III. We affirm that the Common Regional Market is the key instrument to boost economic integration within the Western Balkans, based on EU rules and standards. We acknowledge the pivotal role of RCC in the preparation of the second iteration of the CRM 2025-2028 that will be endorsed this year, as a key pillar of the EU's Growth Plan and a stepping stone to the region's accelerated accession to EU Single Market.

IV. We support the RCC's ongoing efforts to facilitate the implementation of regional programmes and projects. In this regard, we particularly emphasize the SEE 2030 Strategy and we urge RCC to continue working on its full implementation and to ensure its priorities remain aligned with the current challenges facing the SEE region.

V. We recognise human security and resilience as the new priorities of SEE2030 Strategy and consider incorporating them into the existing one, which will focus more on regional resilience.

VI. We underline a significant level of parallelism between the priorities set by the Reform and Growth Facility of 2024-2027 for the relevant SEECP beneficiaries and the objectives of the SEE2030 Strategy. Enhancing the potential synergies between two processes requires the coherent implementation of both in a consolidated way rather than their parallel implementation, to the maximum possible extent.

VII. We urge RCC to promote synergies between the Growth Plan and SEE2030 and consolidate the implementation of its activities related to the Growth Plan and Common Regional Market such as strengthening human capital, decelerating brain drain, enhancing the rule of law, and strengthening sustainable economic development with the ones of SEE2030 Strategy. SEE2030 governance structures will provide appropriate platforms for monitoring the consolidated implementation. In this context, we expect RCC to report the progress achieved in consolidating the two processes at our next meeting.

VIII. We commend Skopje CiO for successful stewardship of the selection process of the Secretary General of the RCC. Recognising the excellent qualities of all candidates for the position of Secretary General of the RCC, we approve the appointment of Mr. Amer Kapetanovic as the new Secretary General of the RCC as of 1st of January 2025.

IX. We endorse the Annual Report of the Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council for the period 2023-2024 and appreciate the activities aligned with the RCC Strategy and Work Programme for 2023-2025.

6. SKOPJE SEECP CHAIRPERSONSHIP-IN-OFFICE

As a founding member of the process, Skopje already held two successful Chairpersonships-in-Office in 2000-2001 and 2012-2013.

The Participants express their appreciation for the intensive and fruitful Skopje Chairpersonship-in-Office for 2023-2024 under the moto Bridging Divides, Building Trust and the presented priorities directed at boosting the ongoing multitude of efforts to enable closer economic cooperation and progress in South East Europe.

The Participants reaffirm the successful delivery of numerous activities with the aim of combining the ongoing regional activities that fall under the Berlin Process, the activities under other regional initiatives and the policies of the EU, with our priorities and giving an additional impulse by enriching them with a more specific and in-depth attention.

The Participants thank Skopje for the excellent organisation and hospitality offered on the occasion of the SEECP Ministerial meeting and the Skopje SEECP Summit.

7. INCOMING SEECP CHAIRPERSONSHIP-IN-OFFICE

The Participants welcome the incoming Tirana Chairpersonship-in-Office for the period 2024-2025 and Sofia SEECP Chairpersonship-in-Office for 2025-2026 on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the SEECP.