

JOINT STATEMENT

FROM THE LEADERS OF THE WESTERN BALKANS SIX (WB6)

“The Growth Plan: Western Balkans Meets EU” Conference, Skopje, 22 January 2024

1. Recognizing the intricate geopolitical landscape characterized by Russia's aggression against Ukraine and ongoing crises in the Middle East, we, the Leaders of the Western Balkans Six underscore the paramount significance of cooperation within the region and integration with the European Union and commit to the advancement of the four freedoms of movement (capital, goods, services, people) for all our citizens.
2. Acknowledging the significance of the Berlin Process summit's Chair's Conclusions in Tirana on 16 October 2023, and the EU-Western Balkans Summit Brussels Declaration on 13 December 2023,
3. Noting that the Western Balkans' new Growth Plan represents a new opportunity to promote the economic and social convergence of our region with the European Union as a tool to advance in the accession process.
4. Committed to seizing the opportunities presented by the Growth Plan and meeting the expectations of our citizens for a more prosperous and stable future within the European Union.
5. Ready to implement this comprehensive plan, anchored in phased integration into the EU Single Market, enhanced regional economic integration, accelerated fundamental reforms, the primacy of democracy, fundamental rights and values and the rule of law, including those that combat corruption and curb political interference in independent institutions that should serve all citizens equally, and increased financial assistance through the Reform and Growth Facility, which carries the potential to inject much-needed dynamism into the enlargement process, enabling us to overcome obstacles hindering our progress.
6. We view the Growth Plan as a chance to incentivize and implement crucial reforms towards closing convergence gap with EU that will boost development, including socio-economic reforms and reforms on fundamentals, during a pivotal moment in the enlargement process. In this spirit, we have started our preparations for the Growth Plan's implementation, including the development of Strategic reform agendas guiding actions and investments over the next four years.

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7. These reform agendas build on individual efforts under Economic and Reform Programmes, which we commit to continue advancing and supporting. Growth Plan Financial Instrument will, on the other hand, complement existing support from the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance and providing an additional boost to the Economic and Investment Plan's implementation and reform priorities identified in the accession paths.
8. Together, as a region, we will concentrate our efforts on promoting regional economic integration through the Common Regional Market based on EU rules and standards while in the same time advancing the opening up of the regional market to the EU Single Market. The region is ready to take additional decisive actions to finalize transformation of the Common Regional Market into a reality. It appreciates the EU's support in the process and is dedicated to the preparation for an ambitious successor to the current CRM Action Plan, emphasizing the significance of collaboration with the Regional Cooperation Council, CEFTA, and the Energy Community and Transport Community, as well as with WB6 Chamber Investment Forum in the process.
9. Recognizing the need for collective contributions towards the development of a new and ambitious CRM plan, our collaborative endeavours aim not only to strengthen integration within our region, but also to pave the way and to be stepping stone for broader integration with the Single Market. This will consist of speeding up our common endeavours in facilitating regional trade, reducing the negative impact of non-tariff measures, opening up the service sector and in facilitating the movement of workers. This visionary approach will create an enabling environment for enhanced economic cooperation and prosperity across borders, underlining our steadfast commitment to regional unity and progress.
10. Acknowledging that the EU is open to reviewing proposals from the Growth Plan aimed at improving economic integration of Western Balkans with the EU and within the region, we will strengthen our efforts to align with EU Single Market rules. This includes opening relevant sectors to all neighbours, adhering to Common Regional Market principles and EU fundamental values, standards and rules, and maintaining the integrity of the EU single market and a level playing field.
11. Recognizing the concerted efforts of both the Western Balkans and the EU to bring the region into the EU, we firmly believe that the Reform and Growth Facility will tangibly advance the accession process for all our citizens and contribute to the narrowing of the social and economic gap of the region, while creating leverage for implementation of market oriented and growth generating reforms.