

Statement of
Aleksandar Vucic, President of the Republic of Serbia
Edi Rama, Prime Minister of the Republic of Albania
Zoran Zaev, Prime Minister of the Republic of North Macedonia
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Skopje, North Macedonia

We today announced OpenBalkan – a shared future of our citizens and the entire Western Balkan. This initiative will make us better and will make Europe better.

We have been joined today by more than 350 representatives of businesses from across the Western Balkans. The spirit of cooperation is evident in the hundreds of connections being forged.

To that end we have signed three agreements today:

- Responding together to natural and other disasters;
- Allowing citizens to work in one another's countries; and
- Helping goods move without delays.

Our goal is simple: to have a single market, without borders. We are asking each of our ministers to come back with practical plans for implementing these agreements by the middle of October. On 4 – 5 November we will meet, with the relevant ministers, in Belgrade to review progress and make decisions needed to implement these commitments fully. We will meet again in Tirana in December to track progress, and we will meet regularly as needed to deepen ties.

Two specific initiatives will get special attention. First, we will see that our people will be able to work anywhere in our countries in the next months. We expect steps toward implementation to be developed by our governments and implemented where possible before we meet in October. We are glad that the Chambers of Commerce will start a program to help businesses and workers find each other across the region so that this program will create opportunities immediately.

Second, we will request that our ministries work together on a VAT information sharing system – consistent with the systems used in the EU – so that cargo will not stop at borders within the Balkan. Trucks still spend more time at our borders than traveling our roads. That must change.

We want to be sure that our people see that things are changing and so we are moving ahead with programs that create opportunities for each other. Already we are promoting tourism and travel in each other's countries. Advertising and discounts are leading to more of our citizens visiting each country, and we hope to see more.

We will look to other ways of deepening ties. We will launch a Balkan Film Commission. Each of our governments will set aside funds to promote films that draw on the talents from across the Western Balkan, not just one place.

We will start a Balkan wine festival to celebrate and encourage sales of wines from across the region.

We will create opportunities for school sports teams to compete with each other, and for young people to spend time with each other. These are simple steps that will lead to a change in how the region operates, and that we hope to build ties that will last lifetimes.

We also will convene a meeting to identify funds for investments that promote regional integration and cooperation. Projects that have regional benefit need special attention. We will invite our colleagues across the region and international investors and donors to work with us so that these projects contribute to jobs, development, and growth across the region, in particular in the context of the EU's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans and Europe's green and digital transitions.

Here are examples of projects that we are discussing. In the Republic of North Macedonia we will support a photovoltaic solar project that will feed the region and EU grids. The aim is to have this controlled regionally, so that all our people benefit. This is part of the region and Europe's green transition. It will help our environment and our economies.

In line with the objectives put forward in the Green Agenda for the Western Balkan approved at the Sofia Summit last November, Albania is developing strategic projects to generate green and sustainable energy as well as sustainable transport with the view to connect the region to the European Ten-T Network. The Skavica Hydropower Plant will allow the export of renewable energy to the entire region. Building gas interconnections is a part of the regional approach and will contribute to the region's green transition and to the stability of the electric grids. A rail corridor from the port of Durrës will connect to the Macedonian and Bulgarian economies and improving multimodal connections with Italy.

We noted that Rio Tinto has announced that it is prepared to invest \$2.4 billion in developing lithium in Serbia, subject to government approvals and ongoing engagement with the local communities. If this project goes forward our countries will work together so that the opportunities created by this will bring industry to Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania, and elsewhere in Europe and the region.

These are the kind of projects that need to be viewed by investors as regional projects, not a collection of national initiatives. The animating principle of our initiatives is that they benefit the entire region, not just one country.

We are European, and our future is in Europe. We remain committed to the Berlin Process and our European perspective. Our governments have committed themselves to the implementation of the four freedoms and of the common regional market, most recently at the Berlin Summit on July 5th. 'Open Balkan' builds on the same vision as the common regional market, and we invite other parties in the region to join us in accelerating, implementing, and meeting our regional commitments.

OpenBalkan is a demonstration of progress that we can make for ourselves. While the EU accession perspective remains the catalyst of our regional cooperation, we do not need to wait for every issue to be resolved, or for Europe to come to consensus, in order to make lives better for our people. In that spirit, we invite all the Western Balkan parties to join us in initiatives, legal instruments, and practical projects such as these.