



Weekly Briefing

**Bulgaria external relations briefing:
Good Neighbourly Relations on the Balkans, Regional Stability, and
Mutual Cooperation are among the main Priorities of Bulgarian
Foreign Policy**
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Traditionally, one of the most important priorities in Bulgarian foreign policy is its Balkan dimension. This is especially true in a global pandemic situation when the need for enhanced regional cooperation and support in the efforts of the countries of a region in their efforts to overcome a number of socio-economic difficulties caused by the crisis situation is becoming of a critical importance.

In this context we can follow some very strong points in the Bulgarian Balkan political activity within the last several weeks.

At first the **EU-Western Balkans summit took place on 6 May 2020** via video conference due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It brought together the heads of state or government from EU member states and the leaders from the six Western Balkans partners – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia and Kosovo. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, chaired the meeting. On this meeting the EU leaders adopted the so called Zagreb declaration, with which the Western Balkans partners have aligned themselves. At the summit EU leaders reaffirmed their unequivocal support for the **European perspective** of the Western Balkans. The EU is determined to strengthen its support to the region's political, economic, and social transformation. Western Balkans partners reaffirmed this perspective as their firm strategic choice. They also recommitted to carry out and effectively implement the necessary reforms towards European values and principles and the primacy of the rule of law. The EU leaders also stressed the importance of **good neighbourly relations**, regional stability, and mutual cooperation. This includes implementing bilateral agreements in good faith and with tangible results, including the Prespa Agreement with Greece and **the Treaty on Good Neighbourly Relations** with Bulgaria. It also refers to finding solutions to bilateral disputes and dedicating additional efforts to reconciliation.

Another key point in this meeting was the one for the EU and the Western Balkans mutual efforts in fighting the coronavirus and its effects. In this regard the EU has mobilized a package of over EUR 3.3 billion to the benefit of the Western Balkans to support the health sector and the social and economic recovery and to provide assistance through the European Investment Bank, as well as macro-financial assistance. The meeting set also co-operation and coordination

in the form joint procurement and the unrestricted trade-flow of protective personal equipment, ensuring the fast flow of essential goods through Green Lanes linking the EU and Western Balkans, the supply by the EU of testing material to check the correct functioning of coronavirus tests in the Western Balkans, as well as close cooperation with relevant health bodies.

The EU urged the Western Balkans leaders to fully exploit the potential of regional cooperation to facilitate the economic recovery after the crisis, including: deepening regional economic integration, building on EU rules and standards to bring the region and its companies closer to the EU Internal Market, through the Regional Economic Area (REA). The leaders also exchanged views on the new phase of close cooperation to tackle the significant socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis. As a next step, the European Commission is invited to come forward with a robust economic and investment plan for the region aiming to boost the economies while improving their competitiveness, to better connect them within the region and with the EU. As a result Western Balkans should be able: to fully link to the EU's single market, to create jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities, to improve the business and investment climate, to promote the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, to strengthen the digital economy and connectivity.

Speaking at a briefing on May 6 after his participation in the EU-Western Balkans Summit, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov emphasized point 9 of the closing declaration which refers to the rule of law, freedom of the media, the fight against organized crime etc. The EU fully supports the promise of Western Balkan partners to inclusive regional cooperation and strengthening good neighborly relations, including with EU Member States. At the beginning of the conference, the Prime Minister announced that for Bulgaria, the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries is the most important incentive for achieving stability, security and prosperity in the region. Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva also welcomed the declaration from Zagreb pointing out that this was a very important sign for the region – that it is part of Europe, and the financial support it have received is essential for the people of these countries. Zaharieva also confirmed that It was very important for Bulgaria that good neighborly relations and the implementation of bilateral agreements were included in the declaration.

On **May 19th**, at a videoconference **meeting of foreign ministers** from Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Slovenia, the Republic of Northern Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo, Bulgarian foreign minister pointed out that one of the most important lessons from the coronavirus pandemic is that we need more cooperation between the countries of the region, as well as between them and the European Union. We need unity, solidarity and support more than ever to stop the spread of the infection and to deal most

effectively with the severe social and economic consequences of the pandemic. As a result of the meeting has been adopted a declaration reaffirming the strategic partnership between the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans and outlining joint action to address the effects of COVID-19 in sectors such as health, transport and tourism. All countries agreed that restoring traffic, opening borders and repealing measures should be a gradual and coordinated process. In the health sector, the foreign ministers agreed on enhanced co-operation, providing for the establishment of a regional network of health facilities to work together to treat patients, as well as the safe resumption of tourism, which is important for the region's economies. With regard to transport, the declaration states that the "Green Corridors" connecting the EU and the Western Balkans must remain "green" in the post-crisis period, for which it is necessary to remove all unnecessary barriers of an administrative and infrastructural nature affecting the flow of goods and passengers. The foreign ministers also reaffirmed the key importance of good neighborly relations for the European perspective of the countries of the Western Balkans.

Regarding the issue of overcoming the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, Minister Zaharieva stressed the importance of using the potential of existing cooperation frameworks - the Berlin Process, the South East European Cooperation Process / Regional Cooperation Council, the Central European Free Trade Agreement. She expressed confidence that the forthcoming meeting in Sofia within the framework of the Berlin Process by the end of the year will contribute to visible results in this context.

During the same day another important event regarding regional cooperation in regard to the further joint actions between the Balkan states took place. The Bulgarian Prime Minister had a **video conference with his Romanian, Greek and Serbian counterparts** focusing on an exchange of experiences in managing the coronavirus pandemic and finding **ways to facilitate the cross-border trade, transport and movement**. The meeting was held on the initiative of Bulgaria. The four prime ministers will also have a meeting face to face on June 1. Discussions during the summit focused on the terms for the normalization of cross-border tourism and transport, sectors that were hard hit by the health crisis and which are crucial for the economic recovery of countries in the region. Special emphasis was placed on a mutual lifting of restrictive measures to allow the resumption of travel by entrepreneurs, workers and tourists. The result of that meeting was an agreement between Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia to ease some travel restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the coronavirus from June 1. Bulgaria has closed its borders to most travelers since mid-March as part of its lockdown measures. Diplomats, seasonal workers and returning Bulgarian nationals are still admitted but currently have to spend 14 days in quarantine. The European Union member state has started to ease its lockdown as the number of new infections has decreased. Bulgarian Prime Minister

Boyko Borissov announced that he have agreed with Greece as of June 1 to allow travel without the obligatory 14-day quarantine for people who travel for business, family or humanitarian reasons. Similar arrangements have been agreed with Serbia, said Borissov. Since Romania has not decided yet and its government is still discussing the issue, Borissov said he hoped Romania's parliament would also soon join the regional initiative to ease border restrictions. Travelers reaching Bulgaria after June 1 will have to present affidavits certifying that they have not been quarantined, that they are familiar with the situation of the country where they are traveling and that they fully take any risk of the trip.

As for Bulgaria's relations with Turkey, the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announces that the Turkish government has decided to release from May 20, 2020 all Bulgarian citizens in need of treatment in Turkish hospitals, with up to two unaccompanied persons to be placed under a 14-day quarantine. Upon entry into Turkey, PCR tests for Covid-19 will be performed at the border crossings of patients and their companions for a fee or samples will be taken for PCR testing.

In addition, one more key initiative was approved by the Bulgarian government regarding Bulgaria's neighboring countries. Bulgaria approved the **granting of financial assistance to the countries of the Western Balkans**. The money is for coping with the consequences of Covid-19 and will be used for the implementation of 6 projects in fulfillment of the Team Europe initiative - the global EU response to Covid-19. The money will go to two sectors – health, and social and economic assistance with a focus on women, children, seniors and people with disabilities. Part of the money – EUR 33,000 – will go to build sensory integration therapy centers in Skopje and Ohrid in Republic of North Macedonia, EUR 34,000 – for a pulmonary hospital in Montenegro, EUR 12, 500 each for health centers in Mostar and Banja Luka, over EUR 10,000 for the renovation of a kindergarten in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Bulgarian government underlined that the official assistance provided to deal with COVID-19 and the consequences of the pandemic in the partner countries of the Western Balkans is completely in line with Bulgaria's national foreign policy priorities. The financing will be provided from the approved funds from the budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, intended for official development assistance.

In **conclusion**, the analysis of the presented facts clearly shows that Bulgaria continues to follow and implement one of its top foreign policy priorities, namely Bulgaria to become a kind of a regional leader and engine of Balkan cooperation. Especially important is the process of the integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union. The crisis caused by the COVID-19 provides a good opportunity for Bulgaria to continue to initiate actions towards reaching variety of agreements for joint action between the Balkan countries especially in

regard to overcoming the socio-economic consequences of the global pandemic at the regional level.