

The refugee crisis underlines the absurdity of Western Balkans states being outside of the EU

*Representatives of governments from the Western Balkans held their second annual Western Balkans summit in Vienna on 27 August. **Florian Bieber** provides an overview of the summit, noting that the talks were dominated by the ongoing refugee crisis and could not address creeping authoritarianism in the region.*



The Viennese Hofburg makes for a grand setting for any summit. When Western Balkan governments met with EU officials and representatives from some EU member states, most notably Germany and Austria, but also Croatia, Slovenia and Italy, the planned signal was to show that EU enlargement is alive, as is regional cooperation.

In comparison to the first such summit last year in Berlin, the Vienna summit comes after a host of regional meetings – some have joked that the prime ministers of the region see each other more often than their own ministers. Regional cooperation has picked up steam, even if EU enlargement remains no closer for most of the region than a year ago. It is undeniable, however, that there is a slightly renewed dynamism.

The refugee crisis might have dominated reporting and the official discussion, but it also highlights the absurdity of the Western Balkans being outside the EU. We are witnessing tens of thousands of refugees crossing an EU and Schengen country to escape through two non-EU countries—Macedonia and Serbia—to get to another Schengen country—Hungary—that is building a fence like the one it dismantled at its Western border 26 years ago. The summit was unable to offer more than symbolic support to the countries where thousands of refugees are stranded in their parks and train stations.

The issue of refugees—misabeled as migrants—overshadowed the summit, but as with any such summit, the key decisions and substances are taken in the weeks and months before. Thus the refugee crisis and the horrific death of some 70 refugees some 50 kilometers from the Hofburg on a highway overshadowed the summit, but did not drown it out.

The governments of the Western Balkans seemed mostly interested in infrastructure and money. The message was mixed as Serbian Prime Minister Vučić said that he did not consider the EU to be an ATM—discovering values to praise Serbia’s treatment of refugees in contrast to some EU members—while Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama rather suggested that it is money from the EU he is after. Either way, both Prime Ministers emphasised the need to support infrastructure.

There is little doubt that regional infrastructure is in need of upgrading and that joint projects, such as a highway linking Albania, Kosovo and Serbia, can have a great



Frederica Mogherini and Serbian prime minister Aleksandar Vucic during the Western Balkans Summit, Credit: EEAS (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

impact. The risk is that the physical infrastructure overshadows other forms of cooperation. Here, lengthy preparations have yielded two encouraging results at the Vienna summit.

The governments signed an agreement to establish a regional youth exchange system based on the [German-French youth office](#). By next year's summit in Paris there should be a treaty and structure ready for the formal establishment. With the involvements of youth ministries, commitment for European and government funding, this project holds some promise for enhancing the cooperation of citizens. Key will be not to crowd out already existing youth exchanges and cooperation.

Similarly, the summit was unusual as civil society was involved for the first time in such an event. Over 50 representatives from regional NGOs, media, trade unions and civic activists met on the eve of the conference and presented recommendations on job creation, media freedom and regional cooperation at the summit itself.

The involvement of civil society was challenging as political leaders in the region are still not used to talking to civil society at eye level and civil society has come under pressure in several countries, such as Montenegro, Serbia or Macedonia. A single summit cannot change this dynamic, but at least the involvement of civil society by the Austrian Foreign ministry sent the signal that they should not be ignored.

Another important signal was the signing of a declaration on bilateral issues (based on this [Policy Brief](#) by BiEPAG). In the declaration, the Foreign Ministers committed themselves not to let bilateral issues stop the European integration process of other countries in the region. This commitment echoes a similar one in the [Brussels agreement between Serbia and Kosovo](#) and a [declaration of the Croatian parliament from 2011](#).

However, for the first time, all countries of the Western Balkans signed up and also invited neighbouring EU countries to join them (the message is clear, even if they are unlikely to join in the commitment). Furthermore, they agreed to report back on progress made at next year's summit in Paris. This declaration came as Montenegro signed a border agreement with Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina on the eve of the summit and Serbia and Kosovo agreed on key outstanding issues.

The most serious bilateral issues involve EU and non-EU members (especially between Macedonia and Greece, but also the borders between Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia remain a potential source of tension) and there is no immediate perspective of resolving them, but the declaration and the agreements signal that at least some potential sources of tensions can be settled.

The stars of the summit were Serbian and Albanian PMs Vučić and Rama, who appeared together at a debate with civil society and the talk show *Okruženje*. Demonstrably on a first name basis, Edi and Aleksandar played up their good ties to put pressure on the EU to deliver. This is a great shift from less than year ago when it took German intervention to get the two to meet first, and the abandoned [Serbian-Albanian soccer game](#) led to a war of words. However, now it appears like an elaborate game the two play in which regional cooperation is working as a distraction, especially for Vučić. As long as he delivers on regional cooperation and Kosovo, the EU and also Germany seem to avoid a second, more critical look at how he is controlling and micro-managing Serbia.

The Vienna summit could not address the creeping authoritarianism in the region. There is a certain irony in the fact that Macedonian PM Gruevski has scored two goals in the [football game of politicians](#) from the Western Balkans against the EU. It is maybe symptomatic that somebody who was under strong pressure a few months ago and who clearly appears to have stretched democratic principles and rule of law can leisurely kick a ball in the goal of the EU team in Vienna.

For a list of the final documents from the summit see [here](#).

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About the author

Florian Bieber – *University of Graz*

[Florian Bieber](#) is a Professor of Southeast European Studies and director of the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz, Austria. He studied at Trinity College (USA), the University of Vienna and Central European University, and received his PhD in Political Science from the University of Vienna. Between 2001 and 2006 he worked in Belgrade (Serbia) and Sarajevo (Bosnia & Hercegovina) for the European Centre for Minority Issues. He is a Visiting Professor at the Nationalism Studies Program at Central European University and has taught at the University of Kent, Cornell University, the University of Bologna and the University of Sarajevo.



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