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Technical note for press

French strategy for the Western Balkans

Since the early 2000s and the end of the armed conflicts that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia, democratic, economic and social development as well as stability have improved significantly in the countries of the Western Balkans (Slovenia, Croatia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia). Slovenia became a member of the European Union in 2004 and Croatia joined in 2013.

However, numerous reforms still need to be made in order to provide long-term stability in the region and to enable it to meet the challenges that need to be addressed, including :

- political challenges (unresolved disputes, even if the Prespa agreement represents significant progress and an example of regional dialogue),
- economic and social challenges,
- difficulties in sustainably establishing the rule of law,
- security issues and external influences which distract the region from its European vocation.

Based on these observations, the French President wanted for France to devise a genuine strategy for the Western Balkans to double down its efforts to ensure the stabilization of the six non-EU members in the Western Balkans, their economic and social development and to enhance the rule of law.

Concrete measures.

I. France will step up political relations with the countries in the region.

The President of the French Republic will visit Serbia in July. The French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs will visit Albania and Kosovo this year. Other visits, by members of government and the French parliament, to all countries in the region will help to step up our relations.

II. France will enhance its bilateral cooperation with the countries in the region in four fields :

1. Economic and social development through intervention by the Agence Française de Développement (AFD).

An intergovernmental agreement was signed with Serbia on 25 February. Five further agreements are currently being negotiated.

The AFD will support regional integration of Western Balkan countries to support their development and stabilization. It will support transitions towards sustainable development, first and foremost ecological and energy transition as well as territorial transition, fields in which the AFD can use French experience and expertise while contributing to the climate objectives set by the French authorities.

The AFD will also lead gender equality projects and support the reconciliation process and young people through the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) for the Western Balkans (designed on the Franco-German Youth Office).

The year-round support provided by the AFD (initially €100m to €150m) will help to leverage financing from other donors, particularly Germany's KfW with whom the AFD will cooperate closely.

2. Security

- fighting illegal trafficking of small arms and light weapons: following the implementation of the Franco-German roadmap aiming to mobilize the countries in the region around concrete measures (particularly increasing security, fighting trafficking networks, and collecting stockpiles of illegal weapons) and to coordinate the assistance of the international community to help countries fight weapons trafficking ;
- enhancing our bilateral cooperation, including inter alia: implementing permanent criminal intelligence units (UPRC) ;
- fighting terrorism and radicalization with support for creation of platforms for flagging up illegal internet content ;
- enhancing our operational cooperation mechanism on issues of internal security ;

3. Justice

- continuing technical cooperation on the fight against trafficking of narcotics, weapons and human beings, and the fight against organized crime and corruption;
- creating new cooperation projects on financial and economic crime and fighting trafficking of cultural property and protected species, which may also be used to finance terrorism;
- putting together joint investigation teams with all countries in the region;

4. Defense

- stepping up exchanges with the countries in the region (political-strategic dialogues, visits by military authorities);
- taking command of the EUFOR-Althea operation on 27 March 2019;
- providing more training for officers from the Western Balkans in French training schools and taking on nationals of the Western Balkans in the French Institute for Higher National Defence Studies (IHEDN);
- supporting the commitment of the countries of the Western Balkans in overseas operations alongside France.

III. France's strategy for the Western Balkans aims to support and complement the work of the European Union to support the region's convergence with Europe.

It will also complement the work undertaken as part of the Berlin Process, in which France has participated since the outset. Some activities will therefore be carried out in a Franco-German framework including :

- the fight against the trafficking of small arms and light weapons,
- support for the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO),
- AFD/KfW cooperation and joint visits to the region.