
HIGHWAYS DOMINATE BALKAN MINI-SUMMIT IN ALBANIA

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01.04.2016

31.03.2016

BalkanInsight

Foreign ministers of Western Balkan countries met on Wednesday in Durres, Albania, with EU Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn to discuss joint infrastructural projects financed by the EU.

The Durres meeting was the fourth such meeting of Western Balkan ministers in the so-called Berlin Process, a five-year process started in August 2014 marked by yearly summits.

The process aims to underline the EU's commitment to the region through helping countries to resolve bilateral disputes and through concrete financial help for joint projects.

In the opening speeches on Thursday, Albania's Dirmir Bushati said the gathering aimed to follow up implementation of the agenda agreed in Vienna in August 2015.

"We need to translate this process into a win-win one, for the Western Balkan countries to finalise the democratic state-building process and for the EU to capitalise on its investment in the region," he said.

He noted common challenges that the Balkan countries are facing such as the refugee crises and terrorism.

But the main topic of the Durres meeting is the "Blue Highway", a major road project designed connect the coasts of Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro and Albania, ending in Greece.

The project is expected to boost tourism in the region and improve mobility. Albania and Montenegro, which will benefit most from the project, have received a grant of 4 million euros from European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, EBRD, for a highway feasibility study.

Albanian-Macedonian projects will form another important part of discussions in Durres, with railways and energy connectivity as the top priorities.

Albania's Bushati on Wednesday held a bilateral meeting with Macedonia's Nikola Poposki to discuss these issues.

Another important project up for discussion on Thursday in Durres is the highway designed to

connect Nis in Serbia with Pristina in Kosovo and end in Durres.

Czech Foreign Minister Lubomir Zaoralek, the under-secretary for Italian Foreign Affairs, Vincenzo Amendola, and the French Secretary of State for European Affairs, Harlem Desir, are also present in Durres; the next Summit of Western Balkan Countries is to be held in July in Paris.

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