

## The Tirana summit: Zelensky is looking for support in the Balkans

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On 28 February Tirana hosted the Ukraine–Southeastern Europe summit, which aimed at enhancing cooperation between Kyiv and its partners in the region. The participants of the meeting – the prime ministers or presidents of Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Montenegro, North Macedonia, Croatia and Moldova – expressed their solidarity with Ukraine as well as their readiness to participate in the peace formula which Volodymyr Zelensky put forward in November 2022. Zelensky, who was present at the event, warned that apart from destroying Ukraine, Russia was also aiming at destabilising the Balkan states. He also came up with the proposal to hold a Ukraine–Balkans Defence Industry Forum to enhance cooperation in this field. In their final declaration, the leaders committed to intensifying their multilateral cooperation in areas such as integration with the EU, the reconstruction of Ukraine and holding Russia accountable for its crimes. The NATO member countries participating in the summit (Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia) supported Kyiv's aspirations for NATO membership (as soon as security conditions allow).

### Commentary

- Since the US Congress is blocking support for Ukraine, Kyiv must seek new sources for ammunition supplies (see [‘A bleak future for Ukraine aid in Washington?’](#)). The Ukraine–Balkans Defence Industry Forum which Zelensky proposed could also serve both as a means to address the EU's limited capabilities for manufacturing artillery ammunition and as an attempt to source it from other markets. The Western Balkan countries (primarily Serbia and BiH) have significant weapon production capacities for both Soviet- (152-mm and 122-mm) and NATO-standard (155-mm) calibres. Additionally, ammunition from these two countries is much cheaper than that manufactured in the EU. However, according to official reports no binding commitments regarding ammunition supplies have been made and the venue and time of the forum are still unknown.
- The obstacles that stand in the way of exporting weapons from BiH and Serbia to Ukraine are of a political nature. The governments in Belgrade and Republika Srpska, which is part of BiH, maintain close relations with Russia. The presidency of BiH, under pressure from Moscow, opposed the sale of weapons to Kyiv back in 2015. However ammunition from BiH and Serbia still reaches Ukraine, albeit indirectly. In July 2023, a Pentagon document was revealed indicating that Serbia had agreed to supply ammunition to Ukraine. The government in Belgrade denied these reports, but acknowledged that

Serbian ammunition could indirectly make its way to Kyiv because Serbia sells it to many countries. Ammunition from BiH and Serbia detected on the front lines primarily reaches Ukrainian forces through intermediaries from other countries (most likely the Czech Republic and the US).

- Even though Serbia has not joined the EU sanctions against Russia and is a hotspot for pro-Russian propaganda in the Balkans, according to reports, the atmosphere during the bilateral talks between Presidents Zelensky and Aleksandar Vučić was positive. The Ukrainian side avoided raising contentious issues. Vučić emphasised that Kyiv respected the territorial integrity of Serbia (Ukraine has not yet recognised Kosovo's independence) and pledged to consider potential arms deliveries. However Serbian pro-government media have downplayed this meeting, emphasising that no agreements were signed, and President Vučić reportedly pushed for references to Russia's destructive influence on the region and sanctions on the Russian Federation to be removed from the summit's final declaration.
- The summit was hosted by Albanian prime minister Edi Rama, and was a diplomatic success for him, as he aspires to be a leader in the Western Balkans. Tirana was the venue of the EU-Western Balkans Summit in 2022 and the Berlin Process Summit in 2023. Due to bilateral tensions in the region, especially between Belgrade and Prishtina, the Albanian capital became a neutral meeting place for regional discussions. However, on this occasion not all the regional leaders were present; the Greek prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who had hosted the first Ukraine–Southeastern Europe summit in Athens in August 2022, did not come to Tirana due to his country's disputes with Albania.