

ADDRESS BY FEDERAL CHANCELLOR FRIEDRICH MERZ

Press Conference on the Occasion of the Berlin Process Leaders' Summit

Miločer, 22 October 2026

First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Government of Montenegro for its hospitality and for the dedicated work it has undertaken during its Presidency of the Berlin Process. Montenegro has truly been an outstanding host.

This is my second visit to Montenegro this year. I last visited in June to attend the EU–Western Balkans Summit, and there are two reasons why I was very pleased to return to your country today.

First, through this visit, I want to convey a message to the citizens of Montenegro: the Federal Government recognises the considerable progress your country has made on its path towards the European Union. We want Montenegro and Europe to reap the benefits of this work in the near future.

Second, the Berlin Process is something I care deeply about. Its aim is to bring the countries of the Western Balkans closer together as a region and to strengthen their ties with Europe. Since 2014, we have achieved a great deal, but this work is particularly important today.

The message of this summit is clear: let us move forward decisively along this path. Today, this is a geopolitical imperative. The Western Balkans must not become a region in which major powers compete for influence. It is in our common interest to ensure that the countries of this region are firmly and irreversibly on the path towards the European Union. Only this shared prospect of access to the Single European Market and the institutions of the European Union can create the stability that the region as a whole needs.

The ongoing brutality of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which we also discussed today, demonstrates just how urgent this remains. The countries of the Western Balkans belong to Europe, both geographically and politically. For a long time, this was little more than a phrase used in speeches to convey goodwill. However, over the past few months, we have finally managed to make tangible progress in this area. Montenegro is well on its way to joining the EU in the near future. Others must follow, and others will follow.

Ahead of the EU–Western Balkans Summit in Tivat in June, the French President and I put forward proposals on how we could make faster and more substantive progress. Over the past few months, we have made considerable headway. At last week's European Council in Brussels, the message was unequivocal: wherever possible, we want to enable what we have termed steps towards gradual integration, bringing countries closer to the European Union step by step. Our meeting today sends precisely the same signal: we want to maintain this momentum in EU enlargement. The EU must grow if it is to assert its sovereignty in the world today and be recognised as a clear global power.

At the same time, however, one thing must be clear: the political will must come from within the region itself. Bold reforms, particularly in the area of the rule of law, are an indispensable prerequisite for any progress. We know that this is also a clear expectation of the citizens of the region. German and European companies investing in the region and creating jobs need transparent business conditions underpinned by the rule of law. There have been encouraging achievements in this area, but much remains to be done.

Overall, the Berlin Process is delivering tangible results, particularly in creating opportunities for younger generations, connecting industrial parks, integrating the telecommunications sector, improving conditions for investment and supporting start-ups.

However, an honest assessment of the situation also requires us to acknowledge that deadlocks persist in a number of areas. We therefore need greater political courage. The dialogue on the normalisation of relations between Pristina and Belgrade, for example, must urgently be brought out of its current impasse. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, too, courage is needed to counter growing polarisation and build bridges.

The countries of the region still face a challenging road ahead. But it is important that they do not have to travel it alone. They are making this journey together with their neighbours, Germany and the other Member States of the European Union. That is why I am pleased that Austria will take over the Presidency from Germany next year, with Christian Stocker succeeding me in this role. Dear Christian, Austria can count on our support. I wish you every success in this important work, which we will continue to support with the deepest conviction.