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**Integrating the Western Balkan partners in the EU represents**

**a geostrategic investment in peace, says the EESC**

**At its March plenary session, the** [**European Economic and Social Committee**](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/) **(EESC) hosted a debate with Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, to discuss the state of play of the accession of the Western Balkan partners. EESC members showed their convincement that integrating the Western Balkan partners in the EU is a geostrategic investment in peace and economic growth.**

The president of the EESC, **Christa Schweng**, opened the debate by stressing the great importance that the EESC attaches to the EU enlargement process to the Western Balkans: "*Our Committee considers the Western Balkans as the missing piece of the puzzle in the European Union's ambition of creating a united and sustainable Europe, a Europe fit for the future. The enlargement of the European Union, and in particular the spread of its democratic values and legal standards to the Western Balkans, is in the interest of both the region and the European Union*". Ms Schweng also insisted on other priorities linked to the EU's neighbourhood policy, such as the preparations for the Eastern Partnership Summit or a pro-active trade policy, and concluded by saying: "*In addition, I am convinced that the European Green Deal should be extended to our neighbourhood, accompanying the Economic and Investment Plans*".

**Óliver Várhelyi** welcomed the fact that the EESC remained so strongly committed to the Western Balkans and said: "*It is our common aim to strengthen democratic societies in the enlargement region*". He mentioned the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had had in the Western Balkans and stressed that "*the European Commission is determined to continue supporting our closest neighbours with all it means in these difficult times*".

According to the Commissioner, the current focus was on providing vaccines to the region as soon as possible. "*This is proving more difficult than we had hoped, but I am very pleased that the COVAX mechanism, to which the EU is among largest contributors, is now delivering the first vaccine doses to the Western Balkans*", he said.

Mr Várhelyi also presented the Commission's [Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/communication_on_wb_economic_and_investment_plan_october_2020_en.pdf), a EUR 9 billion initiative with two major aims: firstly, to kick-start the economic recovery, and secondly, to improve the region’s convergence with the European Union. "*The plan’s ambition is to boost not only the region’s economic development, resilience and competitiveness, but also its social cohesion. We must work together to achieve this*", stressed Mr Várhelyi.

**EESC's recommendations**

The debate with Mr Várhelyi was followed by the adoption of an opinion on [*Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans*](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/enhancing-accession-process-credible-eu-perspective-western-balkans). In this opinion, EESC members welcome the revised enlargement methodology adopted by the Commission in 2020 to make the process "more credible, predictable and political". According to this methodology, negotiating chapters will be organised in thematic clusters and negotiations on each cluster will be opened as a whole.

The rapporteur of the opinion, **Andrej Zorko**, highlighted the importance of the enlargement process: "*Integrating the Western Balkan partners into the EU represents a geostrategic investment in peace, stability, security and economic growth across the entire continent; putting enlargement in a lower position on the EU's list of priorities would make it easier for foreign powers –most notably Russia and China – to frustrate the Union's efforts to anchor the Western Balkans in the EU*".

The opinion adopted by the EESC includes ambitious recommendations, such as the proposal to allow political leaders and citizens from the Western Balkans to join the activities and discussions held in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). **Ionut Sibian**, co-rapporteur of the opinion, stressed: "*The Western Balkan partners share the same interests and problems as the EU and can contribute to the EU's discussions about all policy issues mentioned in the* [*Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe*](https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6796-2021-INIT/en/pdf)."

This proposal is linked to the pessimistic view of the citizens of the Western Balkan countries regarding the EU accession process. A [recent survey](https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-English.pdf) indicates that 82.5% of citizens are in favour of joining the EU, but around 40% of the population of Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina believe that this will not happen until 2040, or that it may never happen.

To counter this feeling, the EESC opinion includes proposals aimed at speeding up the accession process. For example, given the difficulties experienced by Member States in reaching unanimity on enlargement, the EESC considers that the Council should revisit the possibility of introducing qualified majority voting, at least for all intermediary stages of the EU accession process. As stated by Andrej Zorko, "*this does not mean cutting corners; the conditions for accession, in particular the democratic consolidation of the region, should remain non-negotiable. But the Union's approach towards the region should not only be strict, it should also be fair, delivering promised rewards when these are due*".

Along the same lines, the EESC considers that the EU's support to enlargement countries should be generous and include much more than access to EU programmes. The opinion adopted suggests gradually opening up the European Structural and Investment Funds to the Western Balkan countries, extending the use of financial stability mechanisms, allowing the region to participate in the Common Agricultural Policy or enabling circular migration.

According to the opinion, the EU should also invest in developing horizontal civil society structures and providing expertise, technical support and regional and international networking opportunities to social partners and other civil society organisations (CSOs) from the Western Balkans. "*We also ask the Commission to define the concept of 'key stakeholders' more clearly. The EESC is convinced that CSOs should be better recognised and be granted a greater role in the enlargement process*", added **Ionut Sibian**.

The opinion also welcomes the adoption of the Economic and Investment Plan and the specific objectives of the Green Deal for the Western Balkans as useful tools that will contribute to the recovery of the region in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. It also includes recommendations in other areas such as the improvement of education systems, the fight against corruption and the prevention of violations of fundamental rights.

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[VIDEO: The EESC from the inside](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/avdb/video/eesc-inside)

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