Recommendation to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the Western Balkans, following the 2020 summit

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Tonino PICULA (S&D, HR) on the recommendation of the European Parliament to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the Western Balkans ahead of the 2020 summit.

While recalling the strategic importance of the enlargement process for the European Union, Members stressed that the merit-based prospect of full membership of the Western Balkan countries in the Union is in the Union's own political, security and economic interest. Such a prospect is recognition of a major geopolitical challenge for the unification of the European continent and a fundamental incentive for reform in the Western Balkan countries.

The report contains a series of recommendations which the European Parliament should address to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy:

- support the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries by ensuring that the accession process strengthens fundamental values and the rule of law, contributes to sustainable democratic, economic and ecological transformation and social convergence, and promotes good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation;

- increase efforts to strengthen the political will of Member States in progressing with the enlargement process with the Western Balkans, to maintain enlargement as a necessary condition for the EU’s credibility, and to speed up the accession process of those countries that have committed themselves to implementing Union-related reforms;

- consider that the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and Northern Macedonia is in the interest of the Union and give impetus to the negotiations in order to speed up the accession of Montenegro and Serbia;

- provide clear, transparent and consistent accession benchmarks and continuous political and technical support throughout the process, and improve the measuring of progress on the ground ensuring that each candidate country is assessed on the basis of conditionality and its own merits;

- ensure that the enhanced method for accession negotiations adopted by the European Commission is conducive to the ultimate objective of full membership of the Union and that it is applied to those candidate countries whose negotiations have already started if they decide to use it with a view to effective and sustainable alignment with the Union's standards and rules;

- increase the policy incentives offered to the countries of the Western Balkans and encourage the gradual integration of the candidate countries into the Union's sectoral policies and programmes prior to accession, including through targeted financial assistance from Union funds;

- strengthen the conditionality mechanism and insist on the reversibility of the accession process by applying objective criteria when deciding whether negotiations should be interrupted or suspended;

- bring the primacy of democracy, the rule of law, human and fundamental rights back to the heart of the enlargement process and pay particular attention to state capacity building, implementation of court decisions, judicial reforms and efforts to fight corruption and organised crime.

The report furthermore highlighted:

- compliance by the Western Balkan countries with their international obligations to prosecute war crimes and determine the fate of missing persons, in full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and its successor the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT), and the Kosovo Specialist Chambers (SC) and Specialist Prosecutor’s Office (SPO);

against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI);

- the EU’s commitment in solving outstanding bilateral issues and in developing good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation; the Western Balkans are called upon to commit themselves to reconciliation and to finding a peaceful solution to their long-standing disputes;

- the fostering of electoral reforms ensuring free, fair, pluralistic and transparent elections at central and local levels and the strengthening of the role of civil society in the accession process;

- support for a democratic media landscape and resilience to disinformation and disruptive media campaigns;

- the implementation of an anti-discrimination policy and the strengthening of the legal framework to prevent feminicide.

Recalling that the EU is the largest foreign investor in the region by investing EUR 12.7 billion in foreign direct investments between 2014-2018, Members suggested that a strategic economic and investment plan be drawn up to improve competitiveness, the legal and business environment, the situation of SMEs and sustainable development in the whole region in line with the commitments made under the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal.