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 European Parliament adopted by 532 votes to 70, with 63 abstentions, a 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.

While recalling the strategic importance of the enlargement process for the EU, Members stressed that the Western Balkan countries are geographically, historically and culturally part of Europe and the process of integrating them into the European Union is of key importance for the stability and security of the continent as a whole, free and at peace.

The prospect of accession on the basis of merit is also a fundamental incentive for reform in the countries of the Western Balkans.

Parliament addressed the following recommendations to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy:

Maintaining the objective of enlargement

Parliament recommended supporting the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries and enhancing the accession process by ensuring that it reinforces fundamental values and the rule of law, contributes to sustainable democratic, economic and ecological transformation and social convergence, and fosters good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation, which are essential elements of enlargement and the Stabilisation and Association Process.

Members also called for:

- increased efforts to build political will among the Member States in progressing with the enlargement to the Western Balkans;

- an accelerated accession process of the countries committed, both politically and administratively, to the implementation of EU-related reforms;

- the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and Northern Macedonia to be in the interest of the Union, to give impetus to the negotiations in order to accelerate the accession of Montenegro and Serbia and to liberalise the visa regime for Kosovo as soon as possible.

Enhanced method for injecting a new dynamic into the enlargement process

Parliament recommended facilitating the implementation of the enhanced method for accession negotiations adopted by the European Commission for candidate countries whose negotiations have already started if they decide to use it for effective and sustainable alignment with EU standards and rules. It also called for:

- 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;

- increased 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.

Conditionality

Parliament recommended strengthening the conditionality mechanism and insisted on the reversibility of the accession process by applying objective criteria when deciding whether negotiations should be interrupted or suspended. It also highlighted the importance of:

- enhancing ownership of the enlargement process by Member States by increasing the involvement of experts on the rule of law and other areas from the Member States, as well as of civil society and human rights defenders on the ground;

- bringing the primacy of democracy, the rule of law, human and fundamental rights back to the very heart of the enlargement process by opening first and closing last the chapters related to the judiciary, corruption and organised crime, as well as those covering respect for human rights, including minority rights, media freedom and freedom of expression;

- 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);

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

Parliament also recommended:

- 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;

- increasing 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.

Investment strategy plan

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.