Cooperation on fight against organised crime in the Western Balkans

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The European Parliament adopted by 531 votes to 48, with 117 abstentions, a resolution on cooperation in the fight against organised crime in the Western Balkans.

Western Balkan countries must step up their efforts

Parliament stressed that the fight against organised crime and progress in the EU integration process are mutually reinforcing, which is why it is necessary to **accelerate the EU integration process** of the Western Balkan countries. It called on the countries of the Western Balkans to redouble their efforts to implement the necessary reforms, while inviting the EU to place the correct transposition of international instruments supporting the rule of law and targeting corruption and organised crime through financial assistance and practical cooperation at the heart of enlargement policy priorities.

Members called for greater efforts to tackle a range of problems, such as the lack of employment opportunities, corruption, disinformation, elements of state capture, inequality, foreign interference from non-democratic regimes such as Russia and China, and the slow process of EU accession are among the factors that make Western Balkan societies vulnerable to organised crime.

Parliament deplored the **lack of genuine political will** on the part of some of the local political elites to fight organised crime and corruption and eliminate any element of state capture. It also regretted the lack of independence and the often poor functioning of the judiciary. Members called on the Western Balkan countries to **address the shortcomings of their criminal justice systems** and on the Union to encourage a culture of professionalism and performance within the criminal justice system with a view to improving the integrity of the judiciary.

The Western Balkan countries are invited to focus on criminal organisations as a whole in addition to individual cases, to achieve tangible results in **asset recovery** for the benefit of all their citizens and to establish the confiscation of proceeds and instrumentalities of crime as a priority in the fight against corruption and organised crime.

Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)

Around EUR 64 million has been allocated to projects dealing with the fight against organised crime in the Western Balkans under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II). Members recalled that the instrument provides for strong conditionality and that funding should be modulated, or even suspended, in case of significant regression or persistent lack of progress in particular as regards the rule of law and fundamental rights, including the fight against corruption and organised crime. It is therefore in the interest of EU security to ensure that EU funds do not turn out to be counterproductive by strengthening the clientelist networks of corrupt politicians.

Specific types of organised crime

The resolution stressed in particular the importance of:

- increasing focus on prevention and building resilience of groups at risk of trafficking in human beings as the Western Balkan countries are countries of origin, destination and transit for trafficking in human beings, mainly women and girls used for sexual exploitation;

- enhancing efforts to combat migrant smuggling and protect the fundamental rights of smuggled persons, in particular unaccompanied minors: the EU should provide more assistance in addressing these issues, such as financial and technical support;

- tackling financial crime to expose criminal activities and prevent infiltration into the legal economy;

- implementing measures to reduce informal payments where possible, given the importance of the grey economy (estimated to be worth over 30% of the region's GDP);

- supporting the Western Balkan countries in the fight against cybercrime and other online threats;

- developing law enforcement authorities' capacities to better monitor and combat drug trafficking.

Cooperation with the EU (its Member States and agencies) and interregional cooperation

The resolution encouraged the EU to support capacity building in the Western Balkans and to help facilitate **police and judicial cooperation** in the fight against organised crime. It recommended strengthening existing EU-supported structures, such as the Regional Cooperation Council, so that they can play a coherent role in promoting further cooperation.

Stressing the important role of Interpol in the fight against organised crime, Parliament called on EU Member States to support Kosovo's application for membership of this organisation. Members believe that the membership of the six Western Balkan countries in Interpol would further improve the effectiveness of measures targeting transnational crime. They also stressed the need to strengthen cooperation between Frontex and the Western Balkan countries in areas related to the fight against organised crime.

Role of civil society and the media

Parliament called for **civil society organisations** to be more involved in the legislative process and to be given the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to key legislative acts. In this context, it called on the Western Balkan authorities to urgently adopt and implement better laws on **freedom of access** to information through inclusive processes.

Members regretted the growing number of SLAPP cases, which are often used to threaten journalists and individuals to prevent them from exposing the wrongdoings of those in power. They called on the authorities in the Western Balkans to step up their work **to ensure transparency in media ownership** and independence of newsrooms and to protect media freedom from political interference, which are essential elements of a free democratic society.