

EU-Western Balkan Summit

EPP Declaration adopted at the EPP EU-Western Balkan Summit, Sofia
16 May 2018



Fundamentally united by our common EPP values, based on this shared community of principles and the joint commitment to international law and fundamental values, as well as based on the principles upon which the EU was founded, notably those of peace, friendship, solidarity, responsibility, prosperity, freedom, democracy, non-discrimination of persons belonging to minorities, respect for diversity, rule of law and human dignity;

The EPP EU and Western Balkan leaders met in Sofia on 16 May 2018, agreed on the following statement and align themselves with the above and below points:

1. Bearing in mind that the European Union is based on values, norms and principles and that the Western Balkans share the common objective of integration into the European Union, we acknowledge and welcome the Western Balkan efforts and commitments to adhere to the **European values and principles and the primacy of the rule of law.**

The Western Balkans are our closest partners, geographically, historically and economically, while we have to make further efforts to enhance cooperation in the fields of security and connectivity. They are inside the borders of the EU and the European Union is not complete without them. The European future of the Western Balkans is therefore a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe based on common values.

The fear of limiting freedom of speech or freedom of religion cannot serve as an excuse to allow the division of our societies, hate speech or incitement to terrorism. It is
58 silence minorities or to suppress objective, facts-based or legitimate criticism.

2. Being the driving force behind EU integration and recalling the Thessaloniki Summit of 2003, we reiterate our **unequivocal support for a credible enlargement and European accession perspective** for and an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans and for their future within the European Union.

3. Bearing in mind that the EU's assistance and cooperation regarding the region's path to the EU remains one of our key priorities, the EPP remains committed to **increasing its support and presence** in the region **based on strict conditionality** to tangible progress in the rule of law, the fight against corruption, effective strengthening of independence of justice as well as in socio-economic reforms, by the Western Balkan partners. The goal of the reforms should not be just considered for the sake of EU accession only, but primarily for the benefit of the citizens, thus if the Western Balkan partners keep reforming, the EPP will keep supporting their European future.

While we must increase our financial support and improve the visibility of EU-sponsored projects, initiatives by EU Member States and any other regionally owned formats (e.g. the so-called "Berlin process") in the neighbourhood of the Western Balkans, need to be strengthened and extended, as these represent strong complimentary instruments to enhance reforms on the EU accession path.

We remain committed to increasing our presence and our party activities in the Western Balkans through the network of our member parties including the youth organisations. Furthermore, we encourage much stronger, and intensified, **EPP cooperation** within the region.

4. We welcome the Western Balkan partners' commitment to the primacy of **democracy and the rule of law, especially the fight against corruption and organised crime, creation of independence of justice, good governance, as well as respect for human rights and rights of persons belonging to minorities. Civil society** and independent **media** play a crucial role in the process of democratisation.

We strongly support the freedom and independence of media as one of the cornerstones of democratic societies whereas we remain concerned about the state of media and commit ourselves to fostering media pluralism and professionalism in the region, and at the same time encourage the swift resolution and prevention of cases concerning violence against journalists.

5. The Western Balkans must **strengthen good neighbourly relations** and regional stability as a matter of priority, to reinforce their mutual cooperation to find definitive, comprehensive and binding solutions for all their bilateral disputes with neighbours and to promote reconciliation. They will support each other on their respective European paths and commit to not blocking each other, in order to fulfil our shared European vision for the region.

We underline — given Europe's motto "unity in diversity" — the importance of preserving the multi-ethnic character of the region within a peaceful, fruitful and cooperative framework, recognising that good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation are key in this matter.

We reiterate that the **sovereignty and integrity of all the Western Balkan countries** must be fully respected.

6. Constructing a dense web of connections and opportunities within the region and with the EU is vital for bringing our citizens and economies closer together, and for enhancing political stability, economic prosperity, cultural and social development. Building on progress made, including through regional initiatives, we pledge to enhance substantially **connectivity** in all its dimensions (transport, energy, digital, economic and human) and expanding access to broadband to bridge the digital divide in the region.

We support the European Commission's plan to work on a digital agenda, including a roadmap allowing gradual reduction of mobile roaming fees between the EU and Western Balkan partners. This will support the digital transformation of the region and concretely benefit all citizens.

7. We support the EU's efforts promoting a market- and investment-friendly environment in the Western Balkans to move faster towards a **digital economy** and to sustainable and **climate-friendly** societies in line with the Paris agreement. **Energy security** will be prioritised, including through improved energy efficiency, better cross-border inter-connections, diversification of sources and routes, as well as a balanced energy mix better integrating renewable energy.

8. Youth unemployment is particularly high in the Western Balkan region. Special emphasis has to be put toward creating further opportunities for the **youth**. At the same time, by fighting corruption and by strengthening the rule of law and independence of justice, more foreign investors will come and create new job opportunities for the next generation. We need to focus on the generations of young people and ensure

- they have access to quality education, a chance in the labour market and support of their dreams. Young entrepreneurship initiatives should further improve the dreary situation of the youth of the region.

We underline the importance of further support exchange and cooperation between academics, and students, thus strengthening people-to-people contacts.

In this context, the EPP calls on the Member States of the EU to allow for stronger participation of youth from the Western Balkans in initiatives such as Erasmus+ and Discover EU allowing more younger generations to travel and know better other parts of Europe.

9. We welcome the Western Balkan partners' commitment, inter alia, to accelerate **the implementation of the acquis** under the Energy Community and Transport Community Treaties, to remove all administrative barriers at borders, to complete the Regional Electricity Market and to urgently implement the July 2017 Multiannual Action Plan for the Development of a Regional Economic Area underlining that this is neither an alternative nor a parallel process to the EU integration but will reinforce the capacity of Western Balkan economies to meet the EU accession economic criteria, and to implement the EU acquis on a regional scale before joining the EU.

10. We underline that the EU and the Western Balkan partners share many **security challenges** that demand coordinated individual and collective action. When we work together, we are able to address these challenges effectively. Our cooperation in stemming illegal **migration flows** has demonstrated its value and will be developed further. We welcome the positive, responsible support which the partners of the Western Balkans offered during the peak of the migration crisis — which cannot yet be considered as having ended. In order to keep the Western Balkans migration route under control, the EU – by providing a credible European perspective – must contribute to stabilizing the region.

11. We call on all political forces, for a clear commitment to establish strong democracies in their countries, **to refrain from nationalistic, provocative rhetoric, to put aside sensitivities regarding inter-ethnic relations and work on reconciliation for the mutual benefit.** The threat of Islamic and all other forms of radicalisation and extremism, incomplete reconciliation processes as well as insufficient political dialogue must be tackled by all regional leaders.

Countering terrorism and extremism, including **financing, radicalisation and** the return of **foreign terrorist fighters** require our increased cooperation.

We believe that all acts and attempts to destabilise the situation in the region should be tackled by establishing a solid financial and legal framework by the respective governments.

12. We highlight that results in fighting **corruption and organised crime** are essential for the region's political and socio-economic transformation and also for regional stability and security, which are in the best interest of their citizens. We welcome their commitment to take action, in cooperation with the EU and with each other, against **human trafficking, drug cultivation, and smuggling of human beings, drugs and arms** but at the same time underline that much more needs to be done to achieve concrete results.

13. We welcome the contribution of the Western Balkan partners to the **Common Foreign and Security Policy** (CFSP) in all its aspects. We demand a progressive deepening of cooperation in this area, especially an enhanced level of alignment, notably on issues where major common interests are at stake.

14. Disinformation and other hybrid activities will be fought together through greater collaboration in **resilience, cyber security and strategic communication**.

Noting that the EU is the biggest economic partner to the Western Balkan region, we call both on Member States and Western Balkans to reinforce their cooperation in order to actively communicate economic cooperation by increasing visibility of the EU's positive intentions and achievement. We express the need for **tackling disinformation** by our Western Balkan partners in a more effective manner, otherwise there is a risk of jeopardizing EU's positive intentions and the whole EU's momentum as such.

Given the increasing influence of third countries — particularly in regard to both political and financial aspects as well as disinformation campaigns, especially from countries from the east and the south — our European solidarity, engagement and support are needed in order to counteract antidemocratic trends.

We call on the EU institutions and on all EU Member States to intensify their support for all European or national funds and projects in connection to the economic modernisation of the Western Balkan region in order to curb the increasing economic and political influence of third countries.

15. To accelerate improvement in the lives of our citizens in the areas of transport, energy and digital connectivity and security in view of the European perspective of the Western Balkans, drawing on the relevant aspects of the Commission's Communication adopted on 6 February 2018, the EU will launch a **Sofia Priority Agenda** for the EU and the Western Balkans.

We invite all EU Member States and Western Balkan partners to take forward concrete work outlined in the Action Plan of the Commission communication of 6 February including through the «Sofia Priority Agenda» and we support and welcome them as complementary to and in support of the region's European perspective and established procedures and criteria.

We welcome the **Commission's strategy** for "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans" as the basis for the EU's future relations with them and reiterate the messages and objectives the strategy set out

We welcome the Western Balkans focus of the current **Bulgarian EU Council Presidency as well as of the incoming Austrian Presidency and Romanian Presidency**.

We welcome and support the intention and initiative of Croatia's Prime Minister Andrej Plenković to host an **EU-Western Balkans Summit** during the Croatian EU Council Presidency in **2020**.

Recommendations

We commend all recent examples of **concrete improvements of good neighbourly and bilateral relations** in the spirit of reconciliation, such as the Treaty on Friendship, Good neighbourliness and Cooperation between the Republic of Bulgaria and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia as well as we welcome the current window of

-opportunity to resolve the name issue between the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece and ask all stakeholders to positively contribute to it.

We oppose any kind of **boycott of democratic institutions** and believe that the role of any democratic opposition is in constructive work in the parliament to hold the respective governments accountable and control them.

Corruption and organised crime on all levels, including politics, public administration and in society as a whole, need highest attention in the region. We demand all the stakeholders to apply a policy of zero-tolerance, hold accountable and bring to justice all relevant persons and to undertake necessary initiatives especially in the anti-bribery area. Rule of law must be respected and rules of immunity should not be used to hamper criminal investigations.

We condemn all forms of **politically-motivated justice and revenge per- and prosecutions** while bearing in mind at the same time that all criminal acts need to be followed up with full accountability.

All **necessary legislation**, especially in the preparation of elections, need to be brought in line with common values and the necessary legislative framework, as well as with the recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR and EU Election Observers.

We urge all parties to enhance **intra-party democracy** and good internal communications.

Conclusions

The EPP has been the **only political force to actively promote an enlargement agenda since the beginning**. We will continue to be committed to supporting the integration of the Western Balkan partners in the EU and helping them on their reform path.

EU enlargement has been one of the most successful European policies and has proven the attractiveness of the European model, such that it remains an important response to the challenges of consolidating Europe's global role and confirming its responsibility in stabilising the continent by engaging more with the Western Balkan region.

The EU should **not get caught up in enlargement fatigue**, but should keep the priority of the integration process and keep alive a pro-EU spirit in Western Balkans by supporting their aspirations to join the Union, on the basis of the principle of **strict conditionality** in particular, the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria and commitment to maintaining good neighbourly relations as well as the Union's capacity to integrate new states.

We remain committed to increasing our presence and party activities in the Western Balkans through the network of our member parties; and we encourage much stronger, and intensified, **EPP family cooperation** in the region.

We underline that **every candidate and potential candidate aspiring to EU membership must be judged on its own merits** in terms of fulfilling, implementing and complying with the same set of criteria, and that it is the quality of, and the dedication to, the necessary reforms which will determine the time-table for EU accession.

Peace, stability and prosperity in the Western Balkans will have **a long-term positive effect on security and stability throughout the whole European continent. It is part of the reconciliation of European history with its geography.**

**If you have any question
you would like to ask
please contact us.**

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