

EPP Presidency Statement

EPP EU-Western Balkans Zagreb Leaders Meeting
6 May 2020



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EPP EU-Western Balkans Zagreb Leaders Meeting (VC); Wednesday, 6 May 2020

In view of the current **COVID-19 pandemic** and united by our **common EPP values** based on the principles upon which the European Union was founded, the **EPP EU and Western Balkans leaders discussed the common challenges and the EU perspective of the region:**

The **Western Balkans are our closest partners, geographically, historically, culturally and economically.** 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.

As the driving force behind EU integration, while recalling the 2000 Zagreb, 2003 Thessaloniki and 2018 Sofia Summits, the **EPP reiterates its unequivocal support for a credible EU enlargement process and the European accession perspective of our Western Balkans partners,** as well as an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans at all levels, including high-level systematic and regular political dialogues and summits.

The EPP welcomes the **revised methodology for the accession process** and the long overdue positive sign of the EU Council decision to open **EU accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia** in March 2020. It is now time for the countries to put all their efforts in to implementing reforms for negotiations to advance swiftly.

Over the past few months, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our people's lives and our economies, both in the EU and in the Western Balkans. This crisis calls for **European solidarity and unity.** We need to support the European economy, protect jobs, SMEs and the healthcare systems in Europe and in the Western Balkans. We are all together in this, common challenges do not stop at national borders. While the **European Union** is heavily affected, it has provided **essential and unparalleled support to the Western Balkans** to deal with the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, as well as in a wide range of areas from research and innovation, to education and protection of cultural heritage. This goes far beyond what any other partner has provided the region with.

While the COVID-19 recovery will be challenging, it is important that the Western Balkans **keep delivering on their reform commitments and produce tangible results** to create a better perspective in the region for their citizens and in particular for their youth. We as EPP remain committed to increasing our political support and visibility in the region based on conditionality of implementation of necessary reforms.

In the meantime, we welcome the Western Balkans partners' commitment to the primacy of **democracy** and the **rule of law,** especially in the **fight against corruption** and organised crime. The EPP fully supports Western Balkans' reforms for an **independent judiciary,** good governance, respect for human rights and the rights of persons belonging to minorities. **Civil society, the role and rights of a responsible opposition, independent media** as well as **free, fair and transparent election processes** play a crucial role in the process of democratic consolidation, and so too on the European integration path.

Moreover, the Western Balkans must strengthen **good neighbourly relations and regional stability** as a matter of priority. It is imperative that they reinforce mutual cooperation to find definitive, comprehensive

and binding solutions for their bilateral disputes and promote **reconciliation** at all levels of their societies.

As the recent COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, challenges such as **disinformation and other hybrid activities can only be fought together** by building resilience and collaborating on cyber security and strategic communication. Given that the EU is the biggest economic partner of the Western Balkans, we call on Member States and the Western Balkan countries to actively communicate the EU's positive impact on the region and on their people. The Western Balkans must tackle disinformation more effectively without running the risk of jeopardizing our common positive intentions, the positive momentum and the success of our common project.

Furthermore, we commend the **successes and focus on the Western Balkans** of the current **Croatian EU Council Presidency led by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković**, as well as of the incoming **German EU Presidency**, including the Berlin Process.

The EPP believes peace, stability and prosperity in the Western Balkans will have a long-term positive effect on security and stability throughout the European continent. The EPP remains a strong supporter of the Western Balkans enlargement that will lead to the reconciliation of European history with its geography.

Finally, we adhere to and remain committed to our **EPP Western Balkans Summit declaration** adopted by the EPP EU and Western Balkan leaders in Sofia 2018.¹

1 <https://www.epp.eu/files/uploads/2018/05/EU-Western-Balkan-Summit-Declaration-Adop.pdf>

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