

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — Enhancing the accession process — A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans’

(COM(2020) 57 final)

on ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans’

(COM(2020) 641 final)

and on ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — 2020 Communication on EU enlargement policy’

(COM(2020) 660 final)

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The EESC welcomes the Commission’s communications adopted in 2020 in connection with the enlargement of the European Union (EU) to the Western Balkans ⁽¹⁾ and agrees that integrating the Western Balkan partners into the EU represents a geostrategic investment in the peace, stability, security and economic growth of the entire continent.

1.2. The EESC agrees with the conclusions of the Zagreb Summit ⁽²⁾, at which EU leaders reaffirmed the EU’s determination to strengthen its cooperation with the region and welcomed the commitment of the Western Balkan partners to implement the necessary reforms in a thorough and decisive way. The Western Balkans are an integral part of Europe and a geostrategic priority for the EU.

⁽¹⁾ COM(2020) 57 final (5.2.2020) *Enhancing the accession process — A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans*; COM(2020) 641 final (6.10.2020) *An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans*; COM(2020) 660 final {SWD(2020) 350 final} — {SWD(2020) 351 final} — {SWD(2020) 352 final} — {SWD(2020) 353 final} — {SWD(2020) 354 final} — {SWD(2020) 355 final} — {SWD(2020) 356 final} (6.10.2020) 2020 Communication on EU enlargement policy.

⁽²⁾ Zagreb Declaration, 6 May 2020.

1.3. The EESC is convinced that, in addressing common challenges and problems that are not only political but also economic and social, social partners and other civil society organisations (CSOs) ⁽³⁾ should play a greater role in, and be more actively involved in, the entire enlargement process. The Commission should define the concept of 'key stakeholders' more clearly. After all, organised civil society is the bridge between politics and people, helping to monitor whether fundamental principles such as freedom of speech, the rule of law, the independence of the media, equal treatment and the fight against corruption are actually implemented in practice.

1.4. The EESC welcomes the revised enlargement methodology adopted by the Commission in 2020 ⁽⁴⁾. Since the aim of the revision was to make the process more credible, predictable and political, the Commission should implement it for Albania and North Macedonia, as soon as the Council of the EU adopts its negotiating frameworks, and should swiftly clarify how it will also be adapted to Montenegro and Serbia, which have already expressed willingness to adopt it.

1.5. The EESC welcomes the fact that negotiating chapters will be organised in thematic clusters and that negotiations on each cluster will be opened as a whole. The idea of applying a set of strict conditions in a tangible way will make it easier for EU candidate countries to make progress on the path of reform. The EESC is also particularly satisfied by the emphasis placed on the importance of the Fundamentals cluster and the fact that progress here will determine the overall pace of negotiations.

1.6. The EESC welcomes the Commission's proposals to strengthen the accession process and the Council's 'green light' for opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia ⁽⁵⁾, but regrets that the process has been blocked once again and calls for the EU to act as a credible partner and remove the obstacles that are preventing the start of negotiations as quickly as possible.

1.7. The EESC appreciates the way in which the Commission is attaching major importance to building trust among all stakeholders and making sure that, in order for the accession process to regain credibility on both sides and deliver to its full potential, it is based on mutual trust and clear, joint commitments.

1.8. Given the difficulties experienced by the Member States in reaching unanimity on enlargement, the EESC considers that the Council should revisit the possibility of introducing qualified majority voting, at least for all intermediary stages of the EU accession process ⁽⁶⁾. This would grant Member States a strong political role, as is the intention of the new methodology, yet it would also prevent them from frustrating the process while it is ongoing, which is precisely what is currently undermining trust in enlargement and the transformative power of the policy.

1.9. To rebuild confidence in enlargement and strengthen the ways in which the EU reaches out to its natural allies in the region, the EESC is convinced that the EU should allow political leaders and citizens from the Western Balkans to join the activities and discussions held in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), on a consultative basis. In so doing, the EU would build on the precedent of the European Convention of the early 2000s ⁽⁷⁾.

⁽³⁾ In accordance with the established terminology of the EESC, the concepts of 'civil society' and 'civil society organisations' in this opinion include social partners (i.e. employers and trade unions) and any other non-state actors (see Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on *Economic and social cohesion and European integration of the Western Balkans — challenges and priorities* (OJ C 262, 25.7.2018, p. 15)).

⁽⁴⁾ COM(2020) 57 final (5.2.2020).

⁽⁵⁾ Council conclusions on enlargement and stabilisation and association process — the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Albania, 25.3.2020.

⁽⁶⁾ Cvijic, Srdjan, Kirchner, Marie Jelenka, Kirova, Iskra and Nechev, Zoran (2019), *From enlargement to the unification of Europe: Why the European Union needs a Directorate-General Europe for future Members and Association Countries*, Open Society Foundations.

⁽⁷⁾ Stratulat, Corina and Lazarevic, Milena (2020), *The Conference on the Future of Europe: Is the EU still serious about the Balkans?*, EPC Discussion Paper, Brussels: European Policy Centre.

1.10. The EESC firmly believes that the EU should also invest in developing horizontal civil society structures by providing social partners and other CSOs from the Western Balkans with expertise, technical support, and regional and international networking opportunities, not least for the purpose of ensuring that they have a more active role in the enlargement process. To keep a check on the transparency and accountability of Western Balkan political elites, the EU should commission regular 'shadow' reports on the state of democracy from CSOs in the region ⁽⁸⁾.

1.11. The EESC stresses that building the national capacity of CSOs and facilitating regional cooperation, as well as expertise exchange, should be maintained among the priorities of the EU and of national funding. Furthermore, reciprocal acknowledgment and collaboration between social partners and other CSOs is essential for levelling up in terms of the challenges raised by the reform agenda in the region and the advancement of the EU enlargement process.

1.12. The EESC appreciates that in order to help Western Balkan partners cushion the blow of the pandemic and relaunch economic and social convergence with the EU, the EU's support should be generous and should include much more than just access to EU programmes. Gradually opening up the European Structural and Investment Funds to the Western Balkan partners (for example to support infrastructure projects), extending the use of the EU's financial stability mechanisms, allowing the region to participate in the Common Agricultural Policy or enabling circular migration, for example, are ideas that warrant serious consideration ⁽⁹⁾.

1.13. The EESC welcomes the European Green Deal ⁽¹⁰⁾, which includes specific objectives for the Western Balkans, as well as the *Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans accompanying the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans* ⁽¹¹⁾. It calls on the partners from the region to work with the EU to adopt green policies by 2030 and achieve climate neutrality by 2050.

1.14. The EESC's expectation is that the next country reports should follow a clear structure for monitoring how civil society is dealt with by Western Balkan governments. This scrutiny should provide the basis for responding with political actions, where backsliding would have consequences and progress would bring concrete benefits. Ultimately, this will reinforce the credibility and transformative power of the enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans.

1.15. The EESC once again invites the EU institutions and the Western Balkans governments to provide for the strengthening of the overall capacities of the social partners, while at the same time fully preserving their independence. A functioning social dialogue should be an important element of the EU accession negotiations. The EESC emphasises that the social partners should be consulted, more systematically and in a timely matter, on all relevant legislative proposals and at all stages when developing strategic documents ⁽¹²⁾.

1.16. The EESC calls for High-Level Civil Society Conferences or Fora to be organised just before, or as side events to, the regular EU-Western Balkans Summits in order to allow the voice of civil society to be heard on subjects addressed at the summits ⁽¹³⁾. Such consultations are vital to ensure objective, bottom-up monitoring of progress in the negotiating process. The EESC could play a role in these events.

⁽⁸⁾ Stratulat *et al.* (2019), *op. cit.*, p. 113.

⁽⁹⁾ Stratulat and Lazarević (2019), *op. cit.*

⁽¹⁰⁾ COM(2019) 640 final (11.12.2019) *The European Green Deal*.

⁽¹¹⁾ SWD(2020) 223 final {COM(2020) 641 final} (6.10.2020) *Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans accompanying the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans*.

⁽¹²⁾ Final declaration of the 7th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum — 16.-17.4.2019, Tirana, Albania.

⁽¹³⁾ Conclusions of the High Level Conference on Economic and social cohesion in the Western Balkans — 15 May 2018, Sofia, Bulgaria.

1.17. The EESC reiterates the recommendations stipulated in the EESC's External Relations (REX) Section contribution to the EU-Western Balkans Summit on 6 May 2020 ⁽¹⁴⁾ as well as in the recent EESC opinions on the *Contribution of civil society to the Green Agenda and Sustainable Development of the Western Balkans as part of the EU accession process*, adopted on 18 September 2020 ⁽¹⁵⁾ ⁽¹⁶⁾.

1.18. The EESC calls upon the current Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU, and in particular the upcoming Slovenian Presidency, to keep the enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans high on the EU's agenda in 2021.

2. EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans matters

2.1. A credible accession perspective is the key incentive for and driver of transformation in the region — ironically already a geographical enclave in the EU, surrounded as it is by Member States — and thus enhances our collective security and prosperity. It is a key tool for promoting democracy, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights, which are also the main engines of economic integration and the essential anchor for fostering regional reconciliation and stability.

2.2. Maintaining and enhancing this policy is thus indispensable for the EU's credibility, success and influence in the region and beyond — especially at times of heightened geopolitical competition. Relegating enlargement to a position lower down on the EU's list of priorities or a slowdown in the process could make it easier for other actors, which often do not share the EU's democratic ambitions — most notably Russia and China — to meddle in the Balkans and cosy up to countries like Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina, as has also been demonstrated during the ongoing pandemic. Such foreign powers can frustrate the EU's efforts to guarantee the continent's security.

2.3. Modern-day challenges such as globalisation, ageing societies, migration, climate change, social disparities, terrorism, radicalisation, organised crime, cyber-attacks and COVID-19 prove that the EU and the Western Balkans region share not only similar interests but, increasingly, the very same problems as well. In strategic, political and economic terms, the EU and the Western Balkans are thus in the same boat. This interdependence begs for joint action if they are to successfully navigate today's complex and unpredictable world ⁽¹⁷⁾.

3. The EU's leverage rests on its credibility

3.1. An Ipsos poll conducted in 2020 ⁽¹⁸⁾ shows that public opinion in the region continues to be overwhelmingly in favour of EU membership (82,5 % on average). It is likely that people in the Western Balkan countries are still supportive of EU integration because they see it as an opportunity for much-needed change in their countries' quality of governance and economic performance. People evaluate positively the EU's role in national political (39,7 %) and economic (40,3 %) reforms. Moreover, it is possible that the Western Balkan public associates the EU with the freedom to work and travel but also peace and security.

3.2. The EESC expresses satisfaction regarding the unprecedented solidarity that the EU has shown towards the Western Balkans during the COVID-19 pandemic, including by giving access and allowing participation in the EU's instruments and platforms usually reserved only for the EU Member States (such as the Health Security Committee (HSC), the European Medicines Agency (EMA), the Joint Procurement Agreement). It expresses hope that such inclusion in the EU policies and instruments will continue also in the post-pandemic period. On other hand, the EESC is concerned that the delays in EU's ability to provide the Western Balkans with urgently needed COVID-19 vaccines could negatively impact the image of the EU in the public opinion of the region.

⁽¹⁴⁾ EESC Contribution to the EU-Western Balkans Summit on 6 May 2020 (published on 28.4.2020).

⁽¹⁵⁾ OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 114.

⁽¹⁶⁾ See also Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on *Economic and social cohesion and European integration of the Western Balkans — challenges and priorities* (OJ C 262, 25.7.2018, p. 15) and Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III)* (OJ C 110, 22.3.2019, p. 156).

⁽¹⁷⁾ Stratulat et al. (2019), *op. cit.*

⁽¹⁸⁾ Survey commissioned by the European Fund for the Balkans in October 2020, as a resource for the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) and conducted in all six countries of the region, based on a nationally representative sample consisting of a minimum of 1 000 respondents aged 18+, through telephone and online interviews.

3.3. Yet, according to the same Ipsos survey (2020), 52,1 % of respondents across the region are dissatisfied with their country's progress towards EU accession and, in particular, with the slow pace of the process. A growing number of citizens in the Western Balkans think that their countries will never join the EU and are concerned that 'the EU does not want us'. More than 44,9 % of respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 42 % in Serbia, 40,5 % in North Macedonia, and 36,8 % in Albania expect their country to become an EU member only after 2040, or possibly never⁽¹⁹⁾. This suggests that the currently high level of popular support for the EU in the region will probably only be as sustainable as the accession prospect proves credible. The time when the EU could take pro-European sentiment on the part of the Western Balkan partners for granted is thus drawing to a close.

3.4. The EESC points out that the plethora of positions taken by the European Parliament's political parties, by EU Member State governments and the by EU institutions are not always aligned with each other, and that this can send incoherent and confusing messages to the region. The EESC is convinced that there is a need for greater internal cohesion among the different actors involved in the formulation of enlargement policy within Member States, so that they can speak with one consistent voice.

3.5. EU institutions like the Commission and the European Parliament (EP) should communicate better and work more closely with Member States in the process of assessing progress and devising strategies for assisting and responding to the Western Balkan partners. The Commission should develop closer bilateral contacts with Member States, for example by organising meetings with ministries of foreign affairs and national parliaments to discuss enlargement, and should coordinate better with other EU-level and regional actors (such as the European External Action Service, the Council, the EP, the EESC, the Committee of the Regions and the Regional Cooperation Council), as well as with civil society. The EP should furthermore encourage better cooperation with and among national parliaments within the EU as a means of nurturing their Europeanisation⁽²⁰⁾.

3.6. The EESC agrees with the Commission's conclusion⁽²¹⁾ that there is a need to focus more on the political nature of the process and to ensure stronger guidance and cooperation at a high level from the EU Member States. The EESC also highlights that it is essential for such stronger political guidance and cooperation to be constructive and beneficial, and that effective assistance is highly important.

3.7. The EESC is convinced that the EU's support for and commitment to the enlargement process in the Western Balkans must be strong and visible. Above all, it is necessary to ensure that the results of the implemented reforms are properly presented and that the impact of those reforms represents a rise in the quality of people's lives.

3.8. The Commission should step up and diversify its communication efforts on enlargement on the ground in the EU Member States and in the region through its local offices and delegations, but also through initiatives that involve local stakeholders and social partners. Reliable communication about the massive EU support on the part of the Western Balkan partners, as well as about the costs and benefits of European integration more generally, depends also on the existence of free and viable media in the region. For this reason, the Commission should insist on respect of the freedom of the media on the part of the Western Balkan partners and should invest in the development and sustainability of the sector.

4. The democratic consolidation of the region is non-negotiable

4.1. The Ipsos poll (2020) reveals that the focal point of people's dissatisfaction is in their national politicians and institutions. Respondents from across the region doubt that their leaders are genuinely committed to the EU integration agenda and decry their corrupt and dysfunctional state institutions⁽²²⁾.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Stratulat, Corina, Kmezić, Marko, Tzifakis, Nikolaos, Bonomi, Matteo, and Nechev, Zoran (2020), *Between a rock and a hard place: Public opinion on integration in the Western Balkans*, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG).

⁽²⁰⁾ Balfour, Rosa and Stratulat, Corina (2015) (ed.), *EU Member States and enlargement towards the Balkans*, EPC Issue Paper No 79, Brussels: European Policy Centre, p. 234.

⁽²¹⁾ COM(2018) 65 final (6.2.2018) *A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*.

⁽²²⁾ Stratulat et al. (2020), *op. cit.*, p. 5.

4.2. It seems that neither the adoption of democratic constitutions nor the EU's rigorous democratic conditionality have managed to overcome informal power structures, state capture and patronage in the Western Balkans, but have instead actually consolidated them⁽²³⁾. Weak democratic institutions and the rise of autocratic rulers in the Western Balkans may reduce rule of law standards, the independence of the judiciary and the freedom of the media in these countries.

4.3. The EU should not make allowances for politicians in the region who clearly dodge their commitment to democracy. The magnitude of calling out 'state capture' in the Commission's 2018 strategy towards the region⁽²⁴⁾, or of critically evaluating the different countries in annual reports, greatly diminishes if the same rhetoric is not echoed by EU officials or Member State politicians travelling to the Western Balkans⁽²⁵⁾. Without a democratic *acquis* to bring to bear on power monopolies, party organisation and competition, or informal practices, Western Balkan politicians are unlikely to pay heed to European democratic requirements when disregarding them is precisely what sustains their power.

4.4. The efforts of the EU institutions to improve the quality of democracy in the Western Balkans through the accession process would be greatly reinforced if democratic reforms in the existing Member States were discussed and addressed together with the EU hopefuls. The many years of strict democratic conditionality applied to the Western Balkan aspirants have produced a wealth of knowledge and practical experience in terms of what does and does not help to induce domestic governance reforms. The Western Balkan partners could thus contribute to the EU's discussions about protecting its rule of law, media freedom and civil society, such as in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE)⁽²⁶⁾.

4.5. The EU should also acknowledge that the growing practice in the Council of withholding promised rewards in spite of tangible progress in the region demotivates politicians from the region from implementing the EU reform agenda, risking derailing even the most reform-minded and consensus-driven political leaders in the Western Balkans.

5. A fragile socioeconomic situation

5.1. The EESC also welcomes the adoption of the Economic and Investment Plan⁽²⁷⁾, which aims to spur long-term recovery, boost economic growth and support the reforms required to move forward on the path to EU accession, including bringing the Western Balkans closer to the EU Single Market. It aims to unleash the untapped economic potential of the region and the significant scope for increased intra-regional economic cooperation and trade.

5.2. The EESC is convinced that all these steps taken by the Commission are very positive and should give a major impetus to the policy; however, in reality, the situation is still challenging (the latest Commission communication on EU enlargement policy and its annual country reports reflect the persisting problems well⁽²⁸⁾).

5.3. The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly caused major shocks in terms of supply and demand for goods and services, a decline in production, rising unemployment and increasing social distress. Yet the region's economic woes precede the Coronavirus crisis. Since the 2008 financial, economic and social crisis, the process of economic and social convergence with the EU in terms of GDP per capita has been very slow or non-existent. Unable to accelerate economic development by

⁽²³⁾ Richter, Solveig and Wunsch, Natasha (2020), *Money, power, glory: the linkages between EU conditionality and state capture in the Western Balkans*, Journal of European Public Policy 27(1), pp. 41-62.

⁽²⁴⁾ COM(2018) 65 final (6.2.2018).

⁽²⁵⁾ Stratulat *et al.* (2020), *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁽²⁶⁾ Stratulat and Lazarević (2019), *op. cit.*

⁽²⁷⁾ COM(2020) 641 final (6.10.2020) *An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans*.

⁽²⁸⁾ COM(2020) 660 final {SWD(2020) 350 final} — {SWD(2020) 351 final} — {SWD(2020) 352 final} — {SWD(2020) 353 final} — {SWD(2020) 354 final} — {SWD(2020) 355 final} — {SWD(2020) 356 final} (6.10.2020) 2020 Communication on EU enlargement policy.

correcting structural problems, such as a lack of public and private investment or a rapidly ageing population, the Western Balkan citizens have been helplessly gazing into a future of relentless deprivation. The pandemic has only exacerbated these socioeconomic problems, risking creating a *de facto* enclave of underdevelopment in the middle of Europe ⁽²⁹⁾.

5.4. The EESC highlights that enhanced economic cooperation and intra-regional trade must help to create decent, safe and quality jobs and to reduce social disparities, and should not be based on unfair competition and social dumping. In this sense, the EU should provide more financial and technical support to the Regional Economic Area and the Connectivity Agenda for the Western Balkans, to encourage trade liberalisation and integration in the region ⁽³⁰⁾, as well as to prevent the region becoming dependent on non-EU powers.

5.5. The Western Balkans have significant untapped economic potential and substantial scope for greater intra-regional economic cooperation and trade. Despite some acceleration in growth and job creation and increases in income in recent years, the countries are still lagging behind in reforming their economic structures and improving competitiveness. They still face high unemployment rates, in particular among young people, significant skills mismatches, persistent informal economies, a brain drain, low female labour market participation and low levels of innovation ⁽³¹⁾. The EESC suggests that consideration should be given to the possibility of applying the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights when assessing the fulfilment of conditions for EU membership ⁽³²⁾.

5.6. The EESC believes that it is very important to improve the quality and relevance of the education and training systems in the region, and that it is essential to strengthen links between employers and educational institutions.

5.7. The investment climate remains largely unchanged and is characterised by weak rule of law, inadequate enforcement of State aid rules, an entrenched grey economy, poor access to finance for businesses and low levels of regional integration and connectivity. State interference in the economy persists. There is a real need to upgrade infrastructure, and investment should be channelled through single project pipelines and be consistent with the priorities agreed with the EU.

5.8. The EESC recalls that the Western Balkans are highly sensitive to the impact of climate change resulting in damage to general health and the economy, and need urgent action to improve the quality of life for their citizens, especially children and young people, by a just transition to a greener model, bearing in mind the 'no one left behind' principle ⁽³³⁾. There are numerous worrying trends as regards climate change in the Western Balkans, such as high dependence on solid fossil fuels. But there are also a lot of opportunities, such as the renewable energy potential and rich biodiversity. The importance and necessity of including the Western Balkans in the Green Deal is not only because climate change knows no national or physical borders, but also because it is important for people's wellbeing and health and provides a tangible benefit from the EU for the citizens of the Western Balkans ⁽³⁴⁾.

5.9. The EU should identify and invest in the key sectors driving the economies of the Western Balkan partners, including in SMEs and the agro-food sector. The EU should also ensure that the standards required of the region do not stifle the development of these sectors with measures that are currently too restrictive for the Western Balkans. Instead, the bar has to be adjusted according to the progress made in these countries and in such a way as to allow for growth to take place.

⁽²⁹⁾ Bonomi, Matteo and Reljić, Dušan (2017), *The EU and the Western Balkans: so near and yet so far*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) Commentary, SWP.

⁽³⁰⁾ Stratulat et al. (2019), *op. cit.*, p. 113. and Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the *Contribution of civil society to the Green Agenda and Sustainable Development of the Western Balkans as part of the EU accession process* (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 114).

⁽³¹⁾ Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on *Economic and social cohesion and European integration of the Western Balkans — challenges and priorities* (OJ C 262, 25.7.2018, p. 15).

⁽³²⁾ *Idem*.

⁽³³⁾ OJ C 429, 11.12.2020, p. 114.

⁽³⁴⁾ *Idem*.

5.10. While the EESC welcomes the EUR 3,3 billion financial package mobilised by the EU for the benefit of citizens and businesses in the Western Balkans, it is necessary to ensure that this money is properly channelled and that the benefits of investment reach people, in keeping with the rationale behind it. The EESC believes that the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis should promote the economic and social cohesion of the region, as well as green policies, and that the green transition has to be an integral part of a comprehensive and forward-looking recovery plan in the Western Balkans.

5.11. The EESC believes that active participation on the part of social partners, including by encouraging collective bargaining, and other CSOs in planning and implementing economic, social and other reforms, can significantly contribute to increasing economic and social convergence, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.12. The Commission's request for greater transparency in the use of funds and the implementation of reforms is welcomed, but it is not clear whether the Commission considers civil society to be among the 'key stakeholders'. In fact, civil society is unfortunately barely mentioned in the Commission's 2020 communications on the Western Balkans.

6. Regional cooperation

6.1. The EESC believes that regional cooperation is a key factor for raising living standards in the Western Balkans.

6.2. Both the Western Balkans Summit in Poznań in 2019 and the EU-Western Balkans Zagreb Summit in May 2020 were opportunities for the leaders of the region to agree to pursue an ambitious green and digital transformation and to continue developing connectivity in all its dimensions: transport, energy, digital and people-to-people.

6.3. The EESC agrees that the Green Agenda, the Economic and Investment Plan, the economic restructuring efforts, investment in tourism and energy and the digital transformation are extremely important for the development and stability of the region. It points out, however, that it is necessary to provide quality and decent jobs that will enable workers to work safely, ensure the economic and social security of workers and bring benefits to the people.

6.4. The EESC believes that special attention should be paid to competitiveness, inclusive growth, living standards, sustainable development, connectivity and the digital transition in the Western Balkans. Entrepreneurial capacity and innovation are also essential for the recovery of the region and local economies. Therefore, the EESC recommends making increased use of the EU's pre-accession funds for supporting start-ups, facilitating training for entrepreneurship and enhancing smart economic strategies in the region, as well as for the investment in necessary infrastructure.

6.5. In the field of environmental policy, the EU focuses on phasing out fossil-based energy sources and replacing them with renewables. In contrast, the Western Balkan partners, especially Serbia, have been accepting Chinese loans to build new thermal plants that run on cheap, inefficient coal, without performing environmental impact assessments⁽³⁵⁾. As a result, Belgrade, Skopje and Sarajevo constantly compete for the position of the most polluted city in the world during the cold winter months, when energy consumption goes up⁽³⁶⁾. One can safely assume that if the region is to be involved in the EU's effort, including during the CoFoE process, to shape a green transition, such projects would be inconceivable⁽³⁷⁾.

⁽³⁵⁾ Matkovic Puljic, Vlatka; Dave Jones; Charles Moore; Lauri Myllyvirta; Rosa Gierens; Igor Kalaba; Ioana Ciuta; Pippa Gallop; and Sonja Risteska (2019), *Chronic coal pollution EU action on the Western Balkans will improve health and economies across Europe*, Brussels: Health and Environment Alliance, p. 18.

⁽³⁶⁾ See, for example, European Western Balkans, *Sarajevo and Belgrade among the most polluted world capitals*, 13 January 2020; Bateman, Jessica, *The young people fighting the worst smog in Europe*, BBC, 2 July 2020.

⁽³⁷⁾ Straulat and Lazarević (2019), *op. cit.*

6.6. The EESC welcomes the fact that the Declaration on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications was endorsed at the Poznań Western Balkans Summit, setting out a model for automatic recognition of higher education qualifications and periods of study abroad, but nevertheless considers it necessary to step up efforts to advance the mutual recognition of professional qualifications in order to create a more integrated labour market and to offer much-needed opportunities for young people in the region.

6.7. The EESC stresses the importance of promoting increased cooperation and cross-border partnership between the EU's Member States and the partners from the Western Balkans, not only at the level of governments, but also at regional and local level, as well as that of organised civil society⁽³⁸⁾.

7. Civil society plays a key role in the accession and legislative process

7.1. The EESC calls for organised civil society to be better recognised in the context of the revised methodology. While the EESC does welcome the fact that funding for CSOs will not decrease in the event of lack of progress in a given country, it regretfully notes that civil society is insufficiently recognised in the Communication⁽³⁹⁾, especially in view of the specific political, economic and social contexts in the Western Balkans, where the role of CSOs in democratic reforms needs to be strengthened.

7.2. The EESC is especially supportive of the cluster approach in the new methodology and stresses the vital importance of the role of the CSOs in all clusters, with a particular emphasis on the Fundamentals and the Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity clusters.

7.3. Civil society continues to be assessed separately within the political criteria as one of the four pillars of democracy; however — much like previous reports — the depth of the assessment varies between countries and there is no consistent and systematic reference to the *Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in Enlargement Countries (2014-2020)*⁽⁴⁰⁾, even if it represents a detailed monitoring tool. In the absence of strategic coherence, a clear monitoring framework and political commitment to further support organised civil society in the enlargement countries, the EU is failing to deliver the political support that CSOs so badly need, not to mention clear guidance for national governments⁽⁴¹⁾.

7.4. The EESC believes that factual merit in a merit-based approach cannot be determined or be considered complete without accrued participation from CSOs and their objective monitoring of the specific political contexts which each of the partners from the region is experiencing.

7.5. The EESC endorses the Commission's proposal that the implementing mechanisms for EU funding should provide a clear basis for defending civic space and for responding to immediate threats to it. Investment in civic education, a more enabling environment, civil society infrastructure and joint action would be crucial to achieve this. An effective response to the shrinking of civic space could be provided through applying the newly-introduced principle of performance to support civil society action. Instead of simply withdrawing allocations from countries that regress in their democratic development, the funds could be re-allocated as civil society support aimed at tackling democratic backsliding in the same country⁽⁴²⁾.

⁽³⁸⁾ Amongst many others, some good examples of such cooperation can be seen in the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR), the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), CIVINET Slo-Cro-SEE, the Balkan Rural Development Network (BRDN), the Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum (WB6 CIF) and the Regional Trade Union Council Solidarnost.

⁽³⁹⁾ COM(2020) 57 final (5.2.2020) *Enhancing the accession process — A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans*.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ *Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in Enlargement Countries (2014-2020)*.

⁽⁴¹⁾ BCSDN *Background Analysis of the Enlargement Package 2020: Should Civil Society Be Satisfied with Just Being Acknowledged?*, October 2020.

⁽⁴²⁾ BCSDN *Feedback on the Consultation of CSOs in the Preparation of IPA III*, 22 April 2020.

7.6. The EU institutions can draw on local civil society resources and enlist the help of the EU delegations in the region to mobilise citizens in the Western Balkan partners, giving them the chance to join the platforms on which EU citizens will have exchanges during the CoFoE. Allowing young people and/or ordinary citizens from the Western Balkans to attend the CoFoE's EU-wide citizens' events would be a significant investment in the region's social capital, creating greater awareness on the ground in the Western Balkans about EU affairs and their relevance to their respective countries. It would also build people-to-people contacts between the EU and the region and improve the ability of these better-informed citizens to keep their political elites in check on issues linked to the EU integration process ⁽⁴³⁾.

Brussels, 24 March 2021.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Christa SCHWENG

⁽⁴³⁾ Stratulat and Lazarević (2020), *op.cit.*, p. 7.