



A historical mistake, but the door must remain open on the Western Balkans

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Luca Jahier, EESC President

Statement by

The EU had the opportunity, and a strong self-interest, to lock in long-term positive momentum across the Western Balkans by starting negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, but EU leaders failed to agree today at the European Summit.



As the President of an EU body representing civil society, I am deeply disappointed to see that the EU failed to respect the engagement taken vis-à-vis those two countries and was not able to keep its word and

open the accession negotiations.

No doubt, the process of “europeanising” this troubled region requires tough structural reforms within the countries in the Western Balkans. No doubt, there is a widespread enlargement fatigue among EU citizens in some countries. No doubt, the divide inside the EU on issues such as immigration and the new budget diverted the necessary political attention away from the enlargement issue.

But the Western Balkans are a key geostrategic region in our backyard, where other world powers – Russia, China, Turkey – are just waiting for Brussels to make a *faux pas*.

North Macedonia and Albania have already fulfilled all the conditions required, and that was strongly endorsed by all EU institutions, which proposed to open accession negotiations, as did 24 Member States.

A historical mistake has now been made. The EU has put its credibility and reliability at stake by not opening accession negotiations with these two countries. It had the choice to open negotiations while applying rigorous conditionality on good governance, insisting on the strict application of the criteria for membership during the negotiations process and devising better instruments to monitor the rule of law after accession. Instead, it has chosen to keep the door closed for now.

The EESC will continue working closely and intensively with civil society in the Western Balkans to support and reassure them that their place is in the European Union. We will do whatever we can to promote reconciliation and European values in the region and our position on EU enlargement will remain firm. We are convinced that a clear perspective on accession is essential for the stability of the region and [express the hope that enlargement](#) will remain one of the EU's priorities, despite the multitude of challenges it's currently facing.

We are confident that all necessary steps will be taken so that the European Council can adopt a unanimous, positive decision before the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb in May 2020.