



Declaration by EESC President Luca Jahier and External Relations Section President Dilyana Slavova on the decision of the European Council to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia

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reassure them that their place is in the European Union.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has strongly supported the enlargement of the European Union to the six Western Balkans countries provided they fulfil all the necessary criteria for membership. In the aftermath of the Council's non-decision to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in October 2019, we have reacted swiftly by adopting, on 31 October, a Resolution expressing our profound disappointment by the lack of unanimity from the Member States. The EESC has since been committed to working closely and intensively with the civil society in the Western Balkans to support and

It is therefore with great pleasure that we welcome the decision of the Council from 24 March 2020 to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. During these difficult times for the region, for Europe and the world, it is of crucial importance to send out to the Western Balkans the encouraging and positive message that we stand united and that, in the words of the president of the European Commission, 'we share the same continent, the same history, the same culture – and that we will share the same destiny too'.

Furthermore, we wish to stress the importance of spreading the European democratic values and legal standards to the Western Balkans, despite the multitude of challenges it faces. In overcoming them, the role of the civil society is vital and needs to be reinforced. The social dialogue and the role of the social partners and civil society organisations in the accession negotiations must be strongly encouraged and promoted, as it is the only way to monitor and ensure respect of core European values, including the rule of law, fundamental human rights, judicial reform, the fight against corruption and discrimination, and freedom of the press. We are firmly committed to continue and strengthen our efforts, through regular activities with partners from the region, to be the voice of the civil society and act as a bridge towards EU institutions and their governments.