



European Economic
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STATEMENT by the President

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Statement by Luca Jahier, President of the European Economic and Social Committee

Western Balkans summit must usher new solidarity mood amid COVID-19 crisis

Tomorrow's EU-Western Balkans Summit can only underline once and for all that the effective enlargement of the European Union and the promotion of its values in the countries of the region ensure security, enhance social and economic development, consolidate democracy and the rule of law in Europe.

A win-win partnership with the Western Balkans leading to accession in the long run can only strengthen the continent as we share the same history, the same culture and the same destiny. After political squabbling, the EU gave its green light to opening accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia in the midst of the Coronavirus crisis, proving that in challenging times common sense prevails.

The reinforced €3.3 billion EU support to the Western Balkans to tackle the coronavirus crisis and the post-pandemic recovery adopted last month is just the beginning of a journey, which can positively usher a new era of close cooperation leading to further integration with the European Union and possibly more cohesive collaboration among countries in the region.

Considering that the Western Balkans is a market of some 18 million consumers whose largest trading partner is the European Union, the Economic and Investment plan to be presented by the European Commission later this year must be ambitious enough to align the Western Balkans on EU policies and initiatives, such as the European Green Deal.

The EESC expects a robust Green Agenda for the Western Balkans in the framework of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, as it is in the interest of both the European Union and

the Western Balkans to turn current challenges into opportunities. The recovery plan to tackle the COVID-19 health, economic and social crisis can only be green and social.

And here, civil society has a crucial role to play in the transition towards a greener and more sustainable society, as it can help shape and implement measures to promote a smart, intelligent, circular and low carbon economy which leaves no one behind.

Only with an ambitious plan the EU will be able to boost economic growth in the region and support reforms required to move forward on the EU path. In addition to continued economic reforms, we must have a stronger focus on the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration.

It is undeniable that for all of the Western Balkan partners, the EU is the leading trade partner accounting for over 72% of the region's total trade, while the region's share of overall EU trade is only 1.4%. Trade with the region has more than doubled since 2006 with the total trade between the EU and the Western Balkans exceeding €54 billion in 2018. This trade expansion has overall been to the benefit of the Western Balkan partners. In the last 10 years, the region increased its exports to the EU by 130% against a more modest increase of EU exports to the region of 49%.

Let's be clear, this Summit must reassert the fact that the EU cannot afford to let the Western Balkans slip to the bottom of its agenda ever again, without risking a permanent loss of trust and credibility, which would only be detrimental to our own security and prosperity and that of the region.

The COVID-19 crisis has made leaders and countries own up to their responsibilities. Without solidarity and a strong resolve to work together we will likely fail to maintain peace and prosperity in Europe.

#UnitedWeStandStronger #WhateverItTakes

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