



5 May 2020

S&D Group Declaration in preparation of **the Western Balkans Summit**

The Group of Socialists & Democrats in the European Parliament welcomes the organisation of the virtual Western Balkans summit of the 6th of May, which proves the permanent interest of the European Union for the region and the readiness to fulfil its commitments and ambitions even in these difficult times.

We are glad that the European Union has managed to agree on a number of initiatives concerning this region, together with a solid financial support package against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic and its expected consequences. These only demonstrate that EU considers countries in the region as already members of the family. The present crisis, should be turned into an opportunity to further consolidate our Union, with a strong attachment to its core values and, particularly, a strong solidarity among the Members of the European family.

The aspiration of countries to join the EU has made the Union more influential, strengthening its capacity to promote positive change in the candidate countries. The enlargement process allows the EU to exert its influence and to kick-start reforms that otherwise may take much more time to be implemented in the candidate countries, considering the fact that EU is the first trade partner and the leading donor and assistance provider for all the countries in the region. We also have to be ready to counter disinformation coming from third actors and to promote our initiatives more boldly in the future both politically and through increased visibility. The EU has to say clearly that we are the key partner to the region when it comes to building democracy and social justice.

While welcoming the decision of the Council of 26 March to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, we are looking forward to the implementation of its conclusions. The commitment to the Copenhagen Criteria on the fundamental values, democratic and accountable institutions has to remain our guiding principle without any compromise. We need to emphasise the political and financial conditionality, with a clear link to progress in implementing the measures assumed in the negotiations on the rule of law, fight against corruption and organised crime as well as the respect of human rights and media freedom.

Enlargement is one of the most successful EU policies, expanding the area of democracy, peace and prosperity across our continent and as such is of common interest to both the EU and the candidate countries. The aspiration of countries to join the EU has made the Union more influential, strengthening its capacity to promote positive change in the candidate countries. For the S&D Group, a stronger focus is necessary on public debates within Member States and on the concerns of the EU citizens in order to make the process both inclusive and successful.

Accession of any country will only happen if and when the necessary conditions are met, without any concessions. We insist that the progress of each country is assessed fairly at each stage, case-by-case, and on the basis of clear merit-based pre-established criteria. The European Socialists are looking particularly for a much needed involvement and ownership of the process on the part of the candidate countries and their citizens.

The countries of Western Balkans should be provided with a stable framework for accession and support during this process which ensures clarity, predictability, credibility and coherence and where conditionality is sincere and promises are kept.

For the S&D Group, the principle of political engagement and gradual access to the EU policies/instruments, including through increased access to financial support, should become a key aspect in the enlargement process. As well, given the environmental challenges faced by the Western Balkans, their location and their membership perspective, the EU should start by looking at these countries with an inclusive approach and with an engagement strategy that works in both directions, with candidate countries themselves interested in becoming part of the Green New Deal transformational process.

A particular aspect of interest for the Socialists & Democrats is linked to encouraging a strong social dimension in the reforms related to the accession process. By promoting growth and the EU social acquis in the candidate countries, better conditions are created for decent work, equal treatment and general well-being at home. Social tensions are mitigated, opportunities for young people are offered, brain drain is reduced and conditions for the elimination of unfair competition are created. Promoting cohesion and ensuring equal treatment of all workers and the respect of labour and social law is the best way to tackle social dumping.

