

# Integration of the Western Balkan countries guarantees security and stability in the region and should remain a top EU priority

## **EU accession remains a key motivation for reforms in the countries of the Western Balkans**

The enlargement of the EU, and in particular the spread of its democratic values and legal standards to the Western Balkan region, is in the interests of both the Western Balkan countries and the EU, insists the European Economic and Social Committee in its opinion on the [Economic and social cohesion and European integration of the Western Balkans](#), adopted at its plenary session on 19 April.

***“It is crucial that the accession of the Western Balkans remains one of the priorities of the EU,”*** said **Andrej Zorko**, rapporteur for the EESC’s opinion. *“Promoting EU values in the region guarantees security and stability, enhances social and economic development, as well as democracy and the rule of law in these countries. And this in turn means stability and security to the EU. In this process, an active role by civil society, including social partners, is of great importance.”*

Corruption, the impact of organised crime, the general weakness of state institutions and the rule of law and discrimination against minority groups are some of the problems that the Western Balkan countries are facing. Their economies continue to grow but, despite that, the six countries remain among the poorest in Europe. It is estimated that full convergence with EU living standards could take as long as 40 years. Therefore the EESC is convinced that the European Commission should develop specific programmes for faster social and economic convergence of the Western Balkans. The EESC welcomes the Commission’s new strategy for the Western Balkans set out earlier this year and is ready to engage with civil society from the region to promote specific measures in the areas of rule of law, security and migration, socio-economic development, connectivity, digital agenda and reconciliation and good neighbourly relations. Offering young people from the Western Balkans more opportunities for education and work and clear prospects for their future would also stem the brain drain and labour migration which is still a dominant issue.

***“The EESC notes that the EU accession process remains a key motivation for reforms in the countries of the Western Balkans,”*** insisted **Dimitris Dimitriadis**, co-rapporteur of the EESC opinion. *“The EESC points out the lack of attention given to the economic and social effects of the reforms carried out, considering the major differences in people’s economic and social security between EU Member States and candidates for membership. Therefore, the EESC recommends that social, economic and territorial cohesion be*

*assessed when evaluating the fulfilment of EU membership criteria.”*

According to the EESC, respect for the rule of law and minority rights is of paramount importance for the democratic, economic and social development of the countries of the Western Balkans. Education and a free and independent media also have a big role to play in overcoming the disputes of the past and enhancing democratic values in the region.

The EESC welcomes the summit of EU-Western Balkans heads of states and governments, to be held on 17 May in Sofia. **Ahead of the summit the EESC will also co-organise on 15 May , together with TAIEX (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange Instrument of the European Commission), a joint civil society conference with representatives of civil society organisations from the EU and the Western Balkans under the title “Economic and social cohesion in the Western Balkans – a civil society point of view”.** The Conference is planned as an opportunity for organised civil society to contribute to the EU-Western Balkans Heads of State Summit. The EESC strongly believes that social partners and other civil society organisations, both at EU and national level, must be meaningfully involved in the entire process of the EU integration of the Western Balkan countries. It proposes that the EU institutions should consider having a functioning social and civil dialogue at national level as one of the criteria for EU membership.