

R03 Upholding the prospect of EU integration of the Western Balkans

The European Union is a community of values. Respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and for human rights, including the rights of those belonging to minorities, constitute the foundation of the EU. The societies within this community uphold pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and gender equality. EU policy towards Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia (the Western Balkan states) holds these values close to their hearts. We European Greens consider that an important priority for EU foreign policy should be the integration, democratisation, stabilisation, and reconciliation of and in the Western Balkans.

We believe that the accession of all Western Balkan states is our historic responsibility as well as a geopolitically strategic necessity to ensure a democratic and peaceful future of the European continent.

Thus, we consider that there is a double responsibility concerning these states, as several Member States have been involved historically in armed conflicts, their outbreak, course, and cessation within the region.

The Western Balkans are an integral part of Europe, both culturally and geographically, as well as economically and, as such, must be welcomed into its political union. The multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural character of the Western Balkans states makes a unique contribution to Europe.

As Greens, we welcome the renewed EU perspective for all six Western Balkans states, as concluded by EU leaders at the Zagreb summit on 6 May 2020 and at the EU-Western Balkans summit on 6 October 2021. This came 18 years after the EU made a firm commitment for the Western Balkans states to join the Union for the first time at the 2003 Thessaloniki European Council. We support this regional approach while understanding that the concrete process toward possible accession should be merit-based and the final decision on accession should be managed on a country-by-country basis. It is now time for the EU Member States to live up to these promises, and revive its role in the region as a credible actor, among others by offering a genuine and realistic perspective of EU accession in case of fulfilment of all official Copenhagen criteria.

We Greens believe that this is the right moment to accelerate the EU's enlargement policy with the aim of accelerating integration. We therefore welcome the new enlargement methodology and demand to use this as a window of opportunity to reinforce the accession process driven by the objective merits of individual countries, and credible and objective frameworks on the EU side. We consider that, following the adoption of new laws in line with the EU *acquis* in candidate countries, priority should be given to areas and mechanisms

ensuring sustainable change, in particular as regards democracy, freedom of the media, fair and free elections, a functioning and independent judiciary, human rights, societal freedom, and a green and just transition.

As Greens, we strongly support the transformation of the Western Balkan countries towards sustainable, genuine, civic, and pluralistic democracies based on individual rights and freedoms, the rule of law and non-corrupt governance, free media, respect for minority rights, and an active, strong, and open civil society. We are deeply concerned by autocratic trends, the erosion of fundamental rights and freedoms, the marginalisation of minorities, the criminalisation of human rights defenders and environmental movements and

initiatives, the emergence of information disorder and hate speech, state capture, growing influence of and the development of alliances of illiberal regimes such as Russia and China.

The responsibility for upholding European values also lies strongly with national governments. Thus, we expect the Western Balkan countries to continue constructive national and regional dialogue towards further democratisation and cooperation and to work towards accession milestones.

The EU strongly objects to any border changes, especially based on ethnic divides. Thus, we strongly advocate for the continuation of the Belgrade - Pristina dialogue and for the implementation of mutually agreed steps. The EU stands behind the Dayton Agreement and will fully support the further building of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a multi-ethnic, multireligious, and civic state. It should urge all actors in the country, and especially the political leadership of Republika Srpska to contribute to fully respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country. Dayton established a special responsibility for the International Community and especially the EU towards Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EU should thus install firm sanctions to the Serb Member of the tripartite Presidency and others responsible for the current political crisis. We acknowledge the influence the Serbian government has in the region, and we await to see that this is not used to stir conflict but to reduce tensions and work further towards reconciliation between all six Western Balkan states.

Overcoming historical divisions and conflicts, staying on the path of EU integration, and working towards further democratisation and a green and just transition is not only a matter of policy direction. It must become part of the political and societal reality and be transformed into political delivery. This can only be achieved when stakeholders sincere to European values are elected, and

genuine support for and cooperation with civil society is ensured. Based on this, the EGP will continue to actively work to strengthen Green parties in the region with the ambition to help them win political ground.

Fundamental rights and freedoms, the rule of law, women's rights, LGBTIQ+ rights, gender equality, social justice, inclusion, and non-discrimination are at the core of the Greens' societal project. As Greens, we support youth and women's organisations in particular,

especially efforts to foster regional cooperation and reconciliation. Likewise, we want to facilitate mobility and exchanges for young people while, at the same time, preventing a brain drain by creating jobs which meet the standards of decent work.

The Western Balkans harbour the blue heart of Europe, its last wild rivers, primeval forests, highest levels of biodiversity and many natural resources. At the same time, the countries still have dysfunctional waste-management systems, rely on outdated and heavily polluting coal-powered plants, lack networks and connectivity, and plan to build several thousand unsustainable micro-hydropower plants in protected areas, without socio-economic impact assessments, public consultations, transparency, and against the will of the local population. We are alarmed by an increase in air and water pollution, land degradation, and the fostering of carbonisation in some of the countries in the region. Not least because such unsustainable issues are supported by China and Russia, not only preventing green policies in the region and impacting citizens' quality of life, but also directly and negatively affecting the EU's own environmental policies and achievements due to their transnational character. The emergence of a polluting Western Balkan region as a stepping stone for anti-environmental policies must be countered and prevented. The EU should also reflect on its own role in this respect and conduct environmental impact assessments for all Flagship Projects under the Commission's Western Balkan Economic and Investment Plan.

We believe that blockades in the Council in recent years have shown that tackling enlargement policy and the situation in the Western Balkan region have been neglected. As European Greens, we commit to ensuring that the accession process in the six Western Balkan countries is high on the agenda at all levels within our member parties. It is also essential to rebuild EU credibility in the Western Balkans, ensuring that citizens and states preserve trust in our common European project, staying motivated to become an integral part of it and to further contribute to its development.

Therefore, the European Green Party:

1. Calls on the European Council to hold intergovernmental conferences to directly start accession negotiations with both North Macedonia and Albania as soon as possible.
2. Calls on EGP member parties to engage and raise national debates about the accession of the Western Balkans and to support Green positions in these debates.
3. Calls on the Commission to link its financial support within IPA III and specifically the 9 billion worth Western Balkans Economic and Investment Plan to progress on crucial areas such as improving the Rule of Law, anti-corruption, transparency, and good governance, and to fully align the funding with EU climate and biodiversity targets including the European Green Deal and the rule of law.
4. Calls on the EU to reinforce the monitoring of democratic processes and media freedom, and the assessment of emergency laws due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the region.
5. Calls on all Member States to immediately recognise Kosovo and grant visa

liberalisation as it fulfils all criteria.

6. Calls on the Western Balkan states to reinforce the respect for implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreements.
7. Calls on the Western Balkan states to increase cooperation in the fight against organised crime in the region.
8. Calls on Bulgaria to open up the path to the first intergovernmental conference and to solve its disputes with North Macedonia bilaterally removing this as a precondition for the opening of accession negotiations.
9. Calls on the EU to increase support to the Western Balkans by creating adequate conditions for refugees and migrants, and a well-functioning asylum and migration policy.
10. Calls for close cooperation among Greens, civil society, and expert panels on protecting nature and biodiversity in the region, urgently replacing coal-fired power plants with renewables, sensitively sited and developed taking into account the views of local communities providing support for the fight against the climate crisis, and for a green and just transition to Green and other actors in the region.

The Council Minutes will record the dissenting vote of Zeleno Dvizhenie Зелено движение/ Green Movement Bulgaria.