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Supporting a European perspective for the Western Balkans

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A. Draft Resolution

1. Strengthening democratic resilience and respect for the rule of law and human rights; promoting reconciliation and good neighbourly relations; and creating the conditions for stronger economic and social progress in the Western Balkans are a geostrategic investment in peace, stability, and democratic security for the whole of Europe. The Parliamentary Assembly, therefore, firmly believes that helping Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo**Throughout this text, all reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo. meet their aspirations for closer European integration is important not only for the countries concerned but for the European continent and will benefit all European citizens.
2. In Thessaloniki in 2003, concluding a historic Summit between the Western Balkans and the European Union, the European Union reiterated its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans. The prospect of EU membership acted as a catalyst for addressing challenges and introducing reforms.
3. Since Thessaloniki, the commitment to enlargement has been repeatedly confirmed at the highest political level, by both the European Union and the leaders of the region. The length of time that has elapsed, however, and failure to adequately reward progress have sapped political momentum and public enthusiasm. Surveys show that an increasing number of people in the Western Balkans, especially amongst the youth, are pessimistic about the prospects of EU accession. The European vision is losing its shine. In its place, ethno-nationalism has resurfaced, a very worrying development in a region in which the spectrum of violence still looms large.
4. The past few years have witnessed a geo-politicisation of the region, with the Russian Federation extending its political influence through an array of soft power tools, including economic investments, media presence, energy policy and vaccine diplomacy. Against the background of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine – an open affront to international law and European values – there is a risk that this influence will be used as a wedge to deepen fractures and lead to further destabilisation. It is thus imperative not to lose focus on the Western Balkans, even if the need to support the European aspirations of other countries, such as Ukraine, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova, has emerged in the meantime.
5. The Assembly calls for a new impetus to be given to the European Union enlargement process. In this context, it welcomes the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia on 19 July 2022. It also commends the diplomatic efforts which have yielded positive results in addressing bilateral disputes including the Prespa agreement between Greece and North Macedonia in 2018, the agreement which led to Bulgaria waiving its opposition to the opening of accession

negotiations with North Macedonia in July 2022, and the agreement on freedom of movement reached on 27 August 2022 by Pristina and Belgrade in the context of the EU-facilitated dialogue.

6. The Assembly also urges the Western Balkans to address with resolve and without delay outstanding challenges, such as a polarised political climate which often affects the collaboration between political forces and sometimes leads to interinstitutional deadlocks and conflicts; serious rule of law and good governance issues which affect the independence and impartiality of the judiciary and the functioning of the public administration; issues relating to the rights of national minorities and minority communities and the persistence of cleavages along ethnic lines which affect many aspects of life; and problems relating to freedom of the media and media ownership. Greater efforts are also necessary to strengthen reconciliation and enhance civil society engagement.
7. Noting that the revised EU enlargement methodology, introduced in 2020, puts an emphasis on democracy, rule of law and human rights, areas in which the Council of Europe has an unparalleled expertise, the Assembly believes that the Council of Europe should redouble its efforts to help the Western Balkan countries make tangible and measurable progress towards meeting the EU enlargement criteria.
8. Furthermore, the Assembly considers that the Council of Europe, as a political organisation, should play a greater role in promoting effective and inclusive regional co-operation, the normalisation of relations and the solution of bilateral differences and disputes. This should be done hand in hand with the European Union and other like-minded actors.
9. In the light of the above, the Assembly calls on the European Union to:
 - 9.1. give fresh impetus to the enlargement process for the Western Balkans, rewarding progress in compliance with criteria and sparing no effort to promote a climate of trust and positive momentum;
 - 9.2. in the context of their strategic partnership and taking into account their common values and convergence of interests, intensify political dialogue with the Council of Europe on how to accelerate the European perspective of the Western Balkans, paying attention to the ownership and sustainability of the reforms, and the need to involve civil society;
 - 9.3. make full use of Council of Europe tools and expertise in the field of rule of law, democracy and human rights, especially in the context of benchmarking and the implementation of co-operation activities, including in the context of the Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Turkey;
 - 9.4. continue to provide financial support to the Council of Europe for joint interventions in the region.

10. The Assembly calls on the authorities in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo to:
 - 10.1. work towards improving the political culture with a view to ensuring collaboration between political forces and institutions;
 - 10.2. further strengthen the efficiency, independence, impartiality and accountability of the judiciary;
 - 10.3. further improve the functioning of the public administration at all levels of governance and strengthen the professionalism, integrity and neutrality of the civil service;
 - 10.4. step up the fight against corruption;
 - 10.5. enhance the participation of civil society in political decision making;
 - 10.6. refrain from inflammatory discourse, including on ethnic grounds;
 - 10.7. protect and promote the rights of national minorities and minority communities;
 - 10.8. ensure freedom of the media and address outstanding issues relating to media ownership, while being vigilant against disinformation and other forms of interference with democratic processes, including via the media;
 - 10.9. be exemplary in promoting reconciliation;
 - 10.10. further align with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union, including in relation to the sanctions and other measures taken in response to the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine;
 - 10.11. support regional co-operation and rules-based multilateralism.
11. The Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States to:
 - 11.1. support the efforts of the Western Balkans to fully pursue their European vocation;
 - 11.2. support the implementation of co-operation activities, including at parliamentary level, aimed at ensuring that the Western Balkans make further progress towards meeting the criteria for EU membership;
 - 11.3. contribute financially to Council of Europe co-operation activities in the region;
 - 11.4. contribute financially to the projects of the Council of Europe Development Bank targeting the Western Balkans;
 - 11.5. promote, through their diplomacy, reconciliation efforts and good neighbourly relations in the region.
12. As regards its own activities, the Assembly resolves to play a greater role in supporting a European perspective for the Western Balkans by:
 - 12.1. holding debates on promoting a European perspective for the Western Balkans, with the participation of EU officials and leaders from the region;

- 12.2. stepping up inter-parliamentary co-operation activities addressed to the countries concerned, aimed at enhancing democratic resilience, institutional capacity, the ownership and sustainability of reforms and civil society consultation and participation in the political decision-making process;
- 12.3. developing initiatives offering the countries concerned an additional platform for parliamentary diplomacy aimed at promoting dialogue, reconciliation, confidence building and good neighbourly relations;
- 12.4. strengthening consultation, co-ordination and co-operation with the European Parliament, including through enhanced political dialogue and the organisation of joint events and meetings.

B. Draft Recommendation

1. Strengthening democratic resilience and respect for the rule of law and human rights; promoting reconciliation and good neighbourly relations; and creating the conditions for stronger economic and social progress in the Western Balkans are a geostrategic investment in peace, stability and democratic security for the whole of Europe. The Parliamentary Assembly, therefore, firmly believes that helping Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo**Throughout this text, all reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo. meet their aspirations for closer European integration is important not only for the countries concerned but for the European continent, and will benefit all European citizens.
2. Noting that the revised EU enlargement methodology, introduced in 2020, puts an emphasis on democracy, rule of law and human rights, areas in which the Council of Europe has an unparalleled expertise, the Assembly believes that the Council of Europe should redouble its efforts to help the Western Balkan countries make tangible and measurable progress towards meeting the EU enlargement criteria.
3. In addition, the Assembly considers that the Council of Europe, as a political organisation bringing together five countries of the region as members and having developed strong co-operation with Kosovo, should play a greater role in promoting dialogue, inclusive regional co-operation, the normalisation of relations and the solution of bilateral differences and disputes, hand in hand with the European Union and other like-minded actors.
4. In the light of these considerations, the Assembly invites the Committee of Ministers to:
 - 4.1. strengthen the political dimension of the strategic partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Union in relation to the Western Balkans;
 - 4.2. further develop co-operation activities addressed to the Western Balkan countries in priority areas such as the rule of law and good governance, including efficiency, independence and accountability of the judiciary, anti-corruption, public administration reform, and civil participation in public decision making;
 - 4.3. support civil society initiatives in the region, especially those relating to reconciliation;
 - 4.4. consider strengthening and expanding the Council of Europe activities relating to confidence building measures and conflict prevention in the region;

Amendment 1

Tabled by Ms Etilda GJONAJ, Ms Jorida TABAKU, Ms Blerina GJYLAMETI, Ms Klotilda BUSHKA, Ms Azadeh ROJHAN, Mr Ahmet Ünal ÇEVİKÖZ

In the draft recommendation, paragraph 3, replace the words "bringing together five countries of the region as members and having developed strong co-operation with Kosovo," with the following words:

"bringing together the countries of the region".

- 4.5. step up the political dimension of its engagement in the Western Balkans, for instance by creating ad hoc working groups, taking the lead in promoting regional or bilateral dialogue, and supporting the implementation of agreements which are achieved thanks to the European Union's mediation or facilitation.