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Supporting a European perspective for the Western Balkans

Reply to Recommendation¹: Recommendation 2237 (2022)

Committee of Ministers

1. The Committee of Ministers has carefully examined Parliamentary Assembly [Recommendation 2237 \(2022\)](#) "Supporting a European perspective for the Western Balkans".
2. The Committee of Ministers recalls that on 20 May 2022 in Turin, it, *inter alia*, "called for co-operation with the European Union – as the main institutional partner of the Council of Europe in political, legal and financial terms – to be stepped up still further in view of the many challenges facing Europe". Accordingly, the strategic partnership with the European Union was further strengthened through its three pillars – political dialogue, legal co-operation and programmatic co-operation. In this framework, the Committee of Ministers has developed its political dialogue with the European Union as regards the Western Balkans, notably through exchanges of views with the EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues, Mr Miroslav Lajčák, on 14 September 2022 and with the EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Mr Olivér Várhelyi, on 19 October 2022. They both underlined the valuable work of the Council of Europe on human rights, the rule of law and democracy with respect to the Western Balkans.
3. The Council of Europe has provided longstanding assistance to the authorities in the region to ensure full compliance with the Council of Europe standards, on the basis of recommendations of monitoring and advisory bodies. Joint Programme co-operation has been progressively broadened in the EU Enlargement Region, illustrating the benchmarking role of the Council of Europe in the areas of human rights, the rule of law and democracy in Europe, based on the 2007 Memorandum of Understanding. While the support is comprehensive and multifaceted and encompasses all the mentioned areas, it is dependent on the availability of extrabudgetary funding. Under the successive phases of the EU/Council of Europe joint programme "Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Türkiye", intensive support has been provided at national and regional levels. This will be continued with the programme's third phase, including through Council of Europe field presence in the region.
4. In more specific terms, the European Commission for Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission) continues to assist the region in its efforts to comply with standards of human rights, the rule of law and democracy (only in 2022, it issued nine opinions in connection with the Western Balkans). The European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice's (CEPEJ) co-operation activities in the region are longstanding and will continue to focus on the EU accession process, justice and human rights-oriented reforms. Its "Dashboard for the Western Balkans" will continue to allow for an analysis and comparison of the efficiency and accountability of judiciaries.
5. Similarly, a third phase of the EU/Council of Europe Joint Programme on co-operation against cybercrime ("iPROCEEDS") is currently under consideration. Important work has also been done in the field of economic crime, in particular the fight against corruption as well as in the fields of prison and police, and will be continued. Specific support will also continue to be provided to prevent money laundering and terrorist financing.

1. Adopted at the 1473rd meeting of the Ministers' Deputies (6 September 2023).



6. The Centre of Expertise for Good Governance sought to promote good democratic governance in the region, support public administration reform, cross-border co-operation and civil participation in political decision making, with existing requests for further support based on Council of Europe tools and standards, including by establishing a regional Centre for Good Democratic Governance.
7. Under the Horizontal Facility programme, extensive work has been done through co-operation with civil society organisations in combating discrimination and hate speech. In addition, the Youth Peace Camps organised annually by the Council of Europe Youth Department are a relevant model of reconciliation, dialogue and conflict transformation.
8. The Council of Europe supported specific reconciliation projects through confidence-building measures. Through its Ordinary Budget, support was provided to reconciliation through inter-municipality co-operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The programme served as a platform for enhancing reconciliation and inter-entity co-operation, including through small grant schemes. Concrete topics for the benefit of everyday life of the people living in these areas were addressed. Such initiatives could be replicated/adapted to the local context throughout the region or scaled up provided that external and long-term funding is secured and upon request by the authorities. In addition, the "Reflection Group on Mostar", put in place by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe achieved positive results, contributing to the effort of restoring local democracy in the city.
9. The Council of Europe will continue, following the request by the European Union, to provide expert assistance and advice to the EU Special Representative in the context of the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, in particular with regard to the relevant instruments and standards of the Council of Europe.
10. Looking towards the future, it should be recalled that the Council of Europe, as a truly pan-European organisation, is uniquely placed to protect democratic security in Europe and promote and uphold human rights, democracy and the rule of law. As such, the Council of Europe should continue to play an important role in the European aspirations of its member States which seek to become members of the European Union.