

## **EPSU Statement for EU-Western Balkans Summit 6 May 2020**

On the eve of the Western Balkans Summit<sup>1</sup> taking place by video conference EPSU agrees on the need to accelerate policies to underpin mutual solidarity and cooperation in these times of the COVID-19 crisis. We welcome firm commitments to support fair and sustained economic, political and social development and call for stronger policies to support democracy and good governance, including through the more active participation of trade unions in the reform and integration processes.

The measures to contain the spread of the virus and to ensure that health and care institutions can cope with rising numbers of infected people have caused a widespread economic and social crisis that is equally felt in the Western Balkans. Both in the Western Balkans and in the EU there needs now to be a stronger focus on the fundamentals of good functioning democratic institutions and societies.

In particular EPSU calls on the Summit to agree concrete steps to reinforce the rule of law in the region, including in the accession process with Albania and North-Macedonia. The COVID-19 crisis is a reminder of how inter-connected and fragile our societies and democratic institutions are. Lessons must be learnt that reforms will backfire, encourage corruption and concentration of power in the hands of oligarchs if there is no underpinning of the rule of law, independent justice systems and strong democratic and participatory institutions, including trade unions. It goes without saying that a credible EU external policy to strengthen democracy and the rule of law must be matched with an equivalent internal EU commitment to put people and the planet before profit.

The efforts of the EU to assist countries to deal with the pandemic and its consequences are welcome but much more is needed. We do urge the European Commission and the Council to ensure that the Western Balkan countries are:

- Part and parcel of the work that is done in the Commission and the EU institutions at large to deal with the pandemic and its aftermath, including long-term commitments to more fair, green, and equal societies. The Western Balkan countries should be included in the Joint Procurement initiatives for example, and measures similar to SURE (to assist unemployment systems) and the health emergency fund (to reinforce the resilience of public health systems) should be considered.
- Equally involved in the recovery plan and can benefit from EU funding for their national plans. These should be based on consultation with the trade unions and employers. It is in the interest of the EU as well as the Western Balkan countries that the recovery benefits both sides.
- Actively supported in strengthening information and consultation rights of workers, collective bargaining and social dialogue. These are key ingredients of democracy and ensure that the voice of all workers can be taken into account in health and safety measures and protocols, in dealing with unemployment and short term working arrangements, in the strategic investments needed for recovery and the longer term policies.

Public investment in the region, as elsewhere, should be used for public good and that subsidies and public contracts must be transparent and conditional on respect for workers'

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<sup>1</sup> Meeting page for the EU – Western Balkans Summit

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2020/05/06/>

rights and environmental standards. Investment should focus on enhancing social cohesion, decent employment, well-functioning, people-centered public administrations, developing adequate social protection systems and quality public services.

In this respect the upcoming investment development plan for the Western Balkans should firmly reject the use of Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) in the region, in line with advice from the European Court of Auditors (ECA) in their critical report on PPP risks. We note that the Court of Auditors in Albania has also expressed concerns about PPPs. In Serbia there has also been a recent scandal with a PPP in the waste sector. Full transparency of PPP contracts is key.

The reform of public sector administrations should make the State and local and regional government more democratic, transparent, accountable, efficient, and a reliable provider and regulator of public services. Reforms should include the strengthening of trade union rights and capacities. It should guarantee the right to information and consultation, to organise, to collective bargaining and to strike for public sector workers. The full implementation of up-to-date ILO Conventions, including Convention 151 should be encouraged.

Public services should be protected and promoted. Specific reform programmes should support governments strengthen the universality and sustainability of their education, healthcare, water or energy systems etc, improving effectiveness, efficiency and outcomes for citizens. Recent experiences of privatisation need to be revisited. For example, the privatisation of pharmacies in Serbia has led to unequal access to medicines and undermined progress to universal public healthcare. It has also led to anti-union practices. More and sustained financial support is needed from the region and the Commission should support governments develop fair and progressive taxation systems.

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights should serve as a benchmark in the EU accession process and in guiding relations with third countries. All the 20 principles of the EPSR are relevant for the accession negotiations, from gender equality, fair wages, health and safety, and collective bargaining to right to health social protection and essential services.

Trade unions should be meaningfully involved in the reform programmes representing workers, their families and communities. As such, they must be at the centre of national dialogues around European integration. Unions are well-placed to promote a public dialogue on employment, economic development, social security and the improvement of living standards. They are also well-placed to contribute to strategies to counter corruption and illegal activity and to strengthen the rule of law. The EU Semester process can provide a model for developing structured national dialogues with trade unions.

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