

"A geo-strategic and historic mistake"

EESC criticises European Council decision to deny the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is deeply disappointed about EU leaders' decision to further postpone opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania at the European Council of 17-18 October, due to the lack of unanimity between the Member States.

EESC President **Luca Jahier** said that the decision to not open accession negotiations with the two countries was *the wrong decision for the second time, and the breaking of a promise, putting Europe's credibility at stake.*

He called the adoption of the EESC resolution, supported by a vast majority of EESC members, *a silent commitment of solidarity. The EESC will continue its work with civil society in the Balkans within the framework of its possibilities.*

In its resolution, the EESC calls not opening accession negotiations a **geo-strategic and historic mistake**.

The EU must not disregard that other global players are already stretching their wings and becoming more and more active in the region – economically with investments, but also with a different value system than that of the EU, underlined president Jahier.

 *Europe is hope for the population in the Western Balkans; it is particularly hope for young people. We should continue to be the voice of civil society in the Western Balkans and build the bridge to the people there,* said **Dilyana Slavova**, the president of the EESC External Relations section. She stressed the important work the EESC has done with civil society and called on members to see the enlargement to the Balkans – which are our direct neighbours – not as an enlargement, but a reunification.

The EESC is convinced that opening negotiations would have given the EU a stronger authority to insist on the strict application of the criteria for membership during the negotiation process and devise better instruments to monitor the rule of law after accession.

In the final declaration of the 7th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum, organised by the EESC in Tirana on 16/17 April 2019, civil society organisations also reiterated that the enlargement of the EU would bring the unique possibility to spread democratic values and legal standards to the Western Balkans.

During the discussion, members stressed not to underestimate the signal that opening accession negotiations would have sent to the people of the Western

Balkans. It would have given hope to the population.

While members agreed with the argument that Europe needs to deepen its ties within the EU, they also stated that this argument should not be in contradiction to enlargement in the Balkans. *We need to stick to our promise, and we need to give hope to the people* was the common credo.