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P9_TA(2021)0506

Cooperation on the fight against organised crime in the Western Balkans**European Parliament resolution of 15 December 2021 on cooperation on the fight against organised crime in the Western Balkans (2021/2002(INI))**

(2022/C 251/08)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the relevant UN conventions, in particular the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the protocols thereto (the Palermo Protocol of 2000) and the United Nations Convention against Corruption,
- having regard to the Council of Europe criminal and civil law conventions on corruption, opened for signature in Strasbourg on 27 January 1999 and 4 November 1999, and to resolutions (98) 7 and (99) 5, adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 5 May 1998 and 1 May 1999 respectively, establishing the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO),
- having regard to the European Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters,
- having regard to the European Convention on the Transfer of Proceedings in Criminal Matters,
- having regard to the Council of Europe Convention on Laundering, Search, Seizure and Confiscation of the Proceeds from Crime and on the Financing of Terrorism,
- having regard to the Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest Convention),
- having regard to the activities of the Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism (MONEYVAL) and the recommendations of the Financial Action Task Force,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 26 June 2018, 18 June 2019 and 25 March 2020 on enlargement and the stabilisation and association process,
- having regard to Council Decision (CFSP) 2018/1788 of 19 November 2018 in support of the South-Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons for the implementation of the Regional Roadmap on combating illicit arms trafficking in the Western Balkans⁽¹⁾,
- having regard to the Commission communication of 6 February 2018 entitled ‘A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans’ (COM(2018)0065),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 24 July 2020 on the EU Security Union Strategy (COM(2020)0605),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 24 July 2020 entitled ‘2020-2025 EU action plan on firearms trafficking’ (COM(2020)0608),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 14 April 2021 on the EU Strategy to tackle Organised Crime 2021-2025 (COM(2021)0170) and the accompanying staff working document entitled ‘EMPACT, the flagship EU instrument for cooperation to fight organised and serious international crime’ (SWD(2021)0074),

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 293, 20.11.2018, p. 11.

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- having regard to the Commission communication of 14 April 2021 on the EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings 2021-2025 (COM(2021)0171),
 - having regard to the agreements on operational and strategic cooperation between the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) and Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, and to the Working Arrangement establishing cooperative relations between the law enforcement authorities of Kosovo and Europol,
 - having regard to the cooperation agreements between Eurojust and Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia,
 - having regard to the agreements on border management cooperation between the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia,
 - having regard to the Berlin Process and the anti-corruption pledges made by the Western Balkan countries in 2018,
 - having regard to Europol's Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment of 12 April 2021 and its Internet Organised Crime Threat Assessment of 5 October 2020,
 - having regard to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report entitled 'Measuring Organized Crime in the Western Balkans',
 - having regard to its resolution of 5 July 2016 on the fight against trafficking in human beings in the EU's external relations ⁽²⁾,
 - having regard to its recommendation of 19 June 2020 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the Western Balkans, following the 2020 summit ⁽³⁾,
 - having regard to its 2019-2020 resolutions on the Commission reports on Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia,
 - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (A9-0298/2021),
- A. whereas organised crime has become a central issue in international affairs and a threat to peace and development which necessitates a common and coordinated response from the EU, its Member States and international partners;
- B. whereas fighting organised crime effectively is part of the EU accession process, notably in the fundamentals cluster and negotiating Chapter 24 on justice, freedom and security;
- C. whereas corruption and organised crime remain a serious concern across the Western Balkan region, which can also have negative impacts on EU Member States; whereas organised crime networks are closely interlinked and rooted both in EU Member States and non-EU states;
- D. whereas the European integration process of the Western Balkan countries is directly dependent on the normalisation of their relations both with each other and with the EU Member States;
- E. whereas organised crime in the Western Balkans is a structural problem with deeply rooted links to business and state institutions and one of the symptoms of state capture, which reforms relating to the EU integration process aim to overcome;
- F. whereas organised crime and corruption go hand in hand with money laundering activities, tax evasion, clientelism and impunity;

⁽²⁾ OJ C 101, 16.3.2018, p. 47.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 362, 8.9.2021, p. 129.

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- G. whereas organised criminal groups collaborate well across borders and ethnic lines, in comparison to the police and judicial authorities of the Western Balkan countries, which urgently need to improve such coordination;
- H. whereas organised crime groups cooperate with groups from countries in the wider European neighbourhood in activities such as human trafficking, migrant smuggling, the smuggling of artefacts and money laundering;
- I. whereas harmonised legal frameworks and their effective implementation, independent anti-corruption and counter-crime bodies, and genuine political will are key to the eradication of organised crime;
- J. whereas according to the UNODC report entitled 'Measuring Organized Crime in the Western Balkans', prosecutions and convictions tend to focus on low ranks of criminal organisations with group leaders more often enjoying impunity in the Western Balkans;
- K. whereas civil society organisations (CSOs) have established themselves as important stakeholders in the fight against organised crime and corruption across the region and play a crucial role, particularly in monitoring and evaluating anti-corruption policies;
- L. whereas more research and more reliable data on organised crime is needed to better design effective policy responses to organised crime and corruption in the region;
- M. whereas education plays a key role in preventing crime and promoting a culture of lawfulness;
- N. whereas the threat posed by organised crime groups originating from the Western Balkans has been wrongfully used as an argument against EU accession in some countries, and should therefore be properly addressed in order to advance further steps in the EU accession process of the Western Balkan countries;
- O. whereas in order to meet the EU membership criteria, the Western Balkan countries need to implement comprehensive reforms in crucial areas and deliver concrete results in judicial reforms and the fight against corruption and organised crime;
- P. whereas strengthening the rule of law and fighting corruption and organised crime are cornerstones of the 2018 EU Western Balkans strategy;
- Q. whereas around EUR 64 million was allocated for projects related to the fight against organised crime in the Western Balkans under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II), which has funded multiple national and multi-country projects supporting a more effective administration of justice in organised crime and corruption cases in the Western Balkans, including through trial monitoring; whereas IPA III also entails specific objectives to develop effective tools to prevent and fight organised crime, trafficking in human beings and illicit firearms, drug trafficking and money laundering;

General situation

1. Stresses that organised crime and corruption first and foremost hurt the citizens of the Western Balkan countries, as they undermine their right to safety and social cohesion as well as their trust in the democratic system, create obstacles to democratic reforms and hamper the accession process, while also having potential and actual negative impacts on the security and stability of EU Member States;
2. Underlines that depriving countries of the Western Balkans of a European perspective is worsening the situation as regards organised crime, and that it can be improved by fostering the EU integration process and cooperation with the Member States; stresses that fighting organised crime and advancing EU integration are mutually reinforcing processes, hence the need to accelerate the EU integration process;
3. Expresses its view that linking visa liberalisation for Kosovo with the fight against organised crime is counterproductive as isolation encourages criminal activities; underlines, once again, that Kosovo has fulfilled all criteria for visa liberalisation and calls on the Council to grant visa liberalisation without further delay;

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4. Notes that the rule of law and the fight against corruption and organised crime are the crucial areas in which the Western Balkan countries need to show tangible results in order to make more progress on their EU path; urges them to significantly ramp up their efforts to advance the necessary reforms and calls for the EU to promote, as a priority of enlargement policy, the correct transposition and implementation of the relevant international instruments that support the rule of law and target corruption and organised crime through financial assistance and practical cooperation;
5. Welcomes the publication of the EU Strategy to tackle Organised Crime 2021-2025 on 14 April 2021 and urges the EU to step up international cooperation on combating organised crime, in particular with the Western Balkan countries, in order to address this transnational threat effectively;
6. Notes that the lack of employment opportunities, corruption, disinformation, elements of state capture, inequality, foreign interference from non-democratic regimes such as Russia and China, and the slow process of EU accession are among the factors that make Western Balkan societies vulnerable to organised crime; urges both the authorities of the Western Balkan countries and their international partners, especially the EU, to intensify their efforts in addressing these challenges, which foment instability, undermine integration, and delay democratic and economic development;
7. Regrets the lack of genuine political will among parts of the local political elites to fight organised crime and corruption and eliminate any elements of state capture;
8. Deplores the lack of independence and proper functioning, in many cases, of the judiciary in the Western Balkan countries and urges that a more strategic approach be adopted in addressing challenges posed by organised crime; calls for the EU to provide further assistance in order to stimulate a culture of criminal justice professionalism and performance and to improve the integrity of the judiciary; notes that although some progress has been made with judicial reforms, substantial efforts are still needed to achieve tangible results;
9. Urges the Western Balkan countries to fully address the shortcomings of their criminal justice systems, including the length of proceedings; calls on the EU and other international partners to provide further guidelines for law enforcement agencies and the judiciary to enhance the professionalism and performance of criminal justice;
10. Welcomes the transposition into national laws by the Western Balkan countries of EU and international standards on asset recovery as well as other efforts to fight organised crime in the region, such as the development of governmental coordination mechanisms and special courts and law enforcement units; regrets, however, that implementation remains low and urges Western Balkan authorities to establish a solid track record in recovering such assets for the benefit of all their citizens and to establish the confiscation of proceeds and instrumentalities of crime as a priority in the fight against corruption and organised crime; calls for EU assistance in supporting adequate capacities for law enforcement agencies as well as proper conditions and resources, highlighting in particular the need to increase expertise in financial forensics in public prosecutors' offices;
11. Calls on the Western Balkan countries to focus their efforts on targeting criminal organisations as a whole in addition to individual cases, thereby establishing a decent track record in prosecuting and convicting high-profile criminals; notes that rightly identifying and accurately investigating criminal activity as 'organised' is essential to the criminal justice response; urges the relevant authorities to fill in the legislative gaps that expose informants and whistleblowers and to protect them and their close relatives from being harassed, sued or threatened in order to increase the capacity to dismantle organised criminal groups and to successfully fight corruption and organised crime; encourages an exchange of best practices with Member States that have been exceptionally successful in the fight against organised crime; calls on the Member States to support witness protection schemes, including through relocation;
12. Calls on the Western Balkan countries to keep a sustained track record in tackling organised crime, corruption and money laundering and to draw up periodic national reports on this matter as well as strengthening interinstitutional cooperation, including in intelligence gathering and sharing, in order to better understand and tackle organised crime;

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13. Reiterates the need to eradicate political and administrative links to organised crime through clear anti-corruption safeguards and the effective prosecution of high-profile corruption cases; calls for the EU to increase support for the consolidation of merit-based public administrations; is highly alerted by reports and accusations of links between high-level political figures and organised crime groups, while the judicial system is ineffective at addressing these claims; underlines that the construction sector in the Western Balkans is among the most vulnerable to organised crime and corruption;

14. Is concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic has been exploited by criminal organisations, including through the misuse of direct public procurement for essential medical equipment and services to healthcare structures, the selling of falsified COVID-19 certificates and the increasing practice of loansharking; calls on the Western Balkan authorities to take action against counterfeit vaccines and vaccination cards; calls on the Commission to link budget support to clear anti-corruption objectives; stresses the need to set up robust mechanisms to monitor implementation to this end;

15. Recalls that IPA III provides for strong conditionality and that funding must be modulated or even suspended in the case of a significant regression or persistent lack of progress in the area of the so-called 'fundamentals', notably in the field of the rule of law and fundamental rights, including the fight against corruption and organised crime; stresses that it is in the EU's own security interests and its responsibility to guarantee that EU funds do not become counterproductive by strengthening clientelist networks of corrupt politicians and privileged businesses;

16. Notes that links between organised crime, politics and businesses existed before the break-up of Yugoslavia and have continued since the 1990s; condemns the apparent lack of will of the responsible authorities to open the former Yugoslav archives; reiterates its call, therefore, for the former Yugoslav archives to be opened and, in particular, for access to be granted to the files of the former Yugoslav Secret Service (UDBA) and the Yugoslav People's Army Secret Service (KOS), and for the files to be returned to the respective governments if they so request;

17. Underlines the importance of cooperation and intelligence sharing with the Member States, with international partners like the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, and with international organisations such as NATO, GRECO, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the UNODC;

18. Welcomes the renewed constructive US engagement in the Western Balkans, including their focus on the fight against corruption; highlights, in this context, the US executive order sanctioning persons contributing to the destabilising situation in the Western Balkans, as well as the US action targeting individuals and entities for significant acts of corruption; calls on the EU to thoroughly assess a possible alignment with such actions;

Specific types of organised crime

19. Notes that the Western Balkan countries are countries of origin, destination and transit for trafficking in human beings, which involves mostly women and girls trafficked for sexual exploitation; notes that human trafficking is the crime with the highest proportional share of links to organised crime; calls on the relevant authorities to place more focus on prevention and strengthening the resilience of groups that are vulnerable to the risks of trafficking in human beings, while underlining the need for an intersectional gender-sensitive approach; welcomes joint actions carried out with international partners, including Interpol and Europol, which have led to the arrests of suspected traffickers and people smugglers;

20. Notes that the Western Balkan countries serve as a transit corridor for migrants and refugees and that the large population movements in recent years have posed an enormous challenge to the region and Member States; calls for enhanced efforts in addressing the smuggling of migrants and in protecting the fundamental rights of smuggled persons, in particular unaccompanied minors, and for greater exchange of information and enhanced coordination between the countries of the Western Balkans and with the Member States; encourages the EU and its Member States to provide more assistance in addressing these issues, such as financial and technical support, concluding informal and status agreements and fostering cooperation via the Joint Operational Office and the Operational Platform — Eastern Mediterranean Route, while taking into account the specificities and needs of the Western Balkan Route, as well as through assistance in establishing dignified reception conditions; calls for enhanced EU external border protection in cooperation with the Western Balkan states;

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21. Underlines that tackling criminal finances is crucial to uncover criminal activities and prevent infiltration into the legal economy; highlights that beneficial ownership transparency is an important policy tool for combating corruption, stemming illicit financial flows and fighting tax evasion; welcomes the efforts of the governments of the Western Balkan countries to address money laundering, including through the adoption of revised anti-money laundering frameworks; expresses concern, however, that they are not being adequately implemented; reiterates the need to significantly improve the enforcement of due diligence provisions and the transparency of beneficial ownership, including in the banking sector;

22. Notes with concern the large share of the grey economy (estimated to be worth more than 30 % of the region's GDP) and massive illicit cash payments flowing across the Western Balkans; calls on governments in the region to implement measures to reduce informality, where possible; underlines that insufficient regulation of online banking increases the risk of money laundering and calls on the Western Balkan states and the Commission to address the issue of international and regional harmonisation within the EU enlargement process;

23. Welcomes the Western Balkan countries' commitment to combating illicit small arms and light weapons trafficking, notably through the adoption of a regional roadmap at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in London, which aims to tackle the illicit possession, use, manufacturing and trafficking of small arms and light weapons; stresses, however, that according to the 2020-2025 EU action plan on firearms trafficking, illicit firearms possession and trafficking remains a serious issue as many weapons that are found and used in organised crime throughout the EU come from the region; calls on the six Western Balkan states to invest in programmes to support disarmaments;

24. Highlights the important work of the South-Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC) in strengthening the capacities of national and regional stakeholders to control and reduce the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons and urges greater cooperation and coordination with SEESAC;

25. Notes that the six Western Balkan countries remain a major transit region for the trafficking of drugs and that drug production and trafficking are the most commonly convicted crimes in the region; welcomes the increasing number of joint counter-narcotics operations; calls, in this respect, for cooperation to be intensified between EU law enforcement agencies such as Europol and the law enforcement bodies of the Member States and Western Balkan countries; underlines that law enforcement authorities must develop their capacities to better monitor and combat drug trafficking;

26. Notes the increase in organised cyber-criminal activities; welcomes the efforts of the Western Balkan countries to expand their capacity to fight cybercrime and the increase in prosecutions for cybercrime; encourages the EU to assist the Western Balkan countries with the appropriate tools and means for tackling cybercrime and other online threats, including through the newly established European Cybersecurity Industrial, Technology and Research Competence Centre; underlines the importance of fighting manipulative disinformation in close cooperation with European partners;

27. Calls on the EU and the Western Balkan countries to work together to address the consistent and growing threats to the protection and preservation of cultural heritage and smuggling of cultural goods, especially in conflict zones; urges greater cooperation between the different law enforcement agencies, including immediate information sharing between national intelligence agencies, and increased cooperation between law enforcement and the arts and archaeological communities;

28. Notes that Western Balkan countries have to increase their efforts to counter other illegal activities carried out by organised crime groups, which include among others labour exploitation, environmental crimes such as illegal logging and poaching, and extortion;

Cooperation with the EU (its Member States and agencies) and inter-regional cooperation

29. Welcomes the increased cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkan countries in the fight against organised crime and encourages the EU to further support capacity-building in the Western Balkans and the facilitation of police and judicial cooperation in countering organised crime; stresses that any cooperation agreement with EU structures must fully respect fundamental rights and ensure an adequate level of data protection; calls on the Western Balkan countries to pursue further legislative harmonisation with the EU *acquis* on public procurement, the fight against organised crime and terrorism, money laundering and cybercrime;

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30. Recommends strengthening the existing EU-sponsored structures such as the Regional Cooperation Council to ensure that they play a consistent role in encouraging further cooperation between the EU, its Member States and the Western Balkan countries;

31. Welcomes the conclusion of cooperation agreements between Eurojust and Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, as well as the authorisation to open negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina; urges the Council to authorise the opening of negotiations for a similar agreement with Kosovo as soon as possible, as judicial cooperation in criminal matters with all Western Balkan countries is crucial to fighting organised crime, especially human trafficking and drug smuggling, which account for the majority of criminal activities in the region; notes that Eurojust has facilitated approximately 200 joint criminal investigations between EU Member States and the Western Balkan countries;

32. Commends the successful cooperation with liaison prosecutors (LPs) from Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia seconded to Eurojust to provide support in cross-border investigations involving their countries and highlights the significant increase in casework after the appointment of LPs; encourages, in this respect, similar cooperation with the remaining Western Balkan countries; welcomes the rising number of cases in judicial cooperation since 2019 despite the challenging circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic;

33. Underlines that the Western Balkans is a region of particular relevance for Europol; welcomes the agreements on operational cooperation between Europol and five Western Balkan countries, as well as the working arrangement with the law enforcement authorities of Kosovo; calls for the full implementation of these agreements and commends the successful operations led in the context of this cooperation; welcomes the opening of Europol's liaison office in Albania in 2019 and the decision to open similar liaison offices in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Serbia; encourages similar cooperation with the remaining Western Balkan countries; underlines, in addition, the importance of cooperating with the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) and European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF); calls on the EU and the Western Balkan countries, in this context, to establish a framework for fruitful cooperation between the EPPO and the Western Balkan countries in order to ensure that the EPPO can effectively exert its competences in the area of EU funding, notably IPA III funds in the Western Balkan countries;

34. Welcomes the working agreements undertaken by the EU Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL) with the Western Balkan countries on specific topics related to combating organised crime; underlines the importance of strengthening further the established mechanisms between CEPOL and the Western Balkans region; takes note of the specialised country reports issued by GRECO and underlines the importance of the EU accession countries enhancing cooperation with GRECO and implementing its specific recommendations thoroughly;

35. Underlines that Interpol is an important instrument in the fight against organised crime; regrets the fact that Kosovo is not yet a member of Interpol despite its multiple attempts; calls on the Member States to proactively support Kosovo's bid to join the organisation; believes that Interpol membership for all six Western Balkan countries would further improve the effectiveness of measures targeting transnational crime;

36. Welcomes the entry into force of the agreements on border management cooperation between the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and Albania, Montenegro and Serbia allowing Frontex to execute joint operations in these countries in order to improve the management of their borders, fight cross-border crime and control irregular migration in line with international standards and with full respect for human rights; welcomes the similar status agreements initiated with North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and calls for all sides to advance the ratification of these agreements as soon as possible and to work on a similar agreement with Kosovo; underlines the need to further develop cooperation between Frontex and the Western Balkan countries in matters related to the fight against organised crime;

37. Reiterates the need to increase the focus on prevention activities and education, particularly the negative societal impact of organised crime and human, drug and arms trafficking, as well as a proper understanding of citizenship, and to increase resilience, paying greater attention to socio-economic conditions, especially in suburban and rural areas, and providing support for local initiatives to reduce vulnerability to crime and corruption, while stressing the need for an intersectional gender-sensitive approach; underlines the importance of democratic capacity-building in the Western Balkans region, including through specialised programmes and pilot projects aimed at strengthening participative democracy and discussing issues linked to fighting organised crime and corruption;

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38. Underlines the importance of monitoring links between organised crime groups and radicalised individuals and terrorist organisations; reiterates the importance of the EU's role in countering terrorist financing and money laundering; encourages further cooperation in this regard, in particular through EU support for training financial experts in the region, information sharing and the exchange of best practices and know-how; welcomes the acknowledgment by the participants of the Western Balkans Summit in Berlin on 5 July 2021 of the need for a multi-agency response, including cooperation with the private sector and CSOs, in order to increase the effectiveness of joint work to tackle serious and organised crime, illicit finance, corruption and terrorism;

39. Underlines that regional cooperation is key to fighting organised crime effectively; commends the work of existing regional initiatives aimed at strengthening interinstitutional relations in the fight against corruption and organised crime between the Western Balkan countries, such as the Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre, and encourages further regional cooperation in combating trans-border organised crime more effectively;

40. Commends the role played by regional initiatives involving EU Member States and Western Balkan countries, such as the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR), the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative, the Central European Initiative, and the Berlin Process; encourages both EU Member States and Western Balkan countries to take part in these initiatives and to exploit their potential fully;

41. Welcomes the funding under IPA for projects encompassing the whole region aimed at improving the capacities of the Western Balkan countries in fighting corruption and organised crime; commends, in particular, the Witness Protection IPA II programme, which has led to the creation of the 'Balkan Network'; calls for this cooperation to be continued and for the Western Balkan Partners to take ownership to keep the network alive;

42. Expresses support for the IPA-funded multi-country programme 'supporting a more effective administration of justice in corruption and organised crime cases in the Western Balkans through trial monitoring' as a step towards a more effective judicial response by the authorities on corruption and organised crime in the Western Balkans; calls on the governments of the Western Balkan countries to fully implement the recommendations formulated as part of the peer reviews by the Member States' experts;

43. Believes that the Western Balkan partners should actively engage in the Conference on the Future of Europe and should be included in a broader European debate on tackling organised crime;

44. Calls on international donors to ensure better coordination of the various programmes countering organised crime and corruption in the Western Balkans in order to avoid duplication and increase the effectiveness of international cooperation in these areas;

45. Notes with concern the lack of credible data on organised crime in the region and calls on the Western Balkan countries to increase the understanding of organised crime by enhancing their capacity to collect and process reliable data on organised crime; underlines the need for more in-depth interdisciplinary research and an intersectional gender-sensitive approach and encourages the Western Balkan countries to work together with international partners to establish national statistical systems that record and analyse organised crime in order to better design efficient, evidence-based policies to prevent and tackle organised crime and corruption;

Role of civil society and media

46. Underlines the crucial role of CSOs, academics and journalists in monitoring the work of governments and judicial and law enforcement agencies and assessing track records in fighting organised crime; notes that legal and institutional frameworks for CSO participation are largely in place in the Western Balkan countries but regrets that their potential is not being used to the full extent and that CSOs focusing on corruption and organised crime are in some cases facing hostility from their governments; calls for CSOs to be more included in the legislative process and for them to be able to make a meaningful contribution to key pieces of legislation; calls on Western Balkan authorities, in this context, to urgently develop, adopt and implement better laws on free access to information through inclusive processes;

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47. Commends the important role played by CSOs in doing preventive work, supporting vulnerable groups, formulating policies and taking on a role of oversight when there is a lack of independent public bodies; is concerned about smear campaigns, pressure and acts of intimidation, which accelerate the shrinking space for CSOs in which to operate;

48. Encourages CSOs in the Western Balkans to establish stronger networks among civil society actors, to identify local counterparts who work on similar issues, and to share further experiences and best practices with a view to understanding the nature and causes of organised crime and support the prevention of radicalisation in the region; welcomes the contributions to strategic communication campaigns by stakeholders such as the Radicalisation Awareness Network and European Strategic Communications Network;

49. Notes that many CSOs depend on private funding and face difficulties in raising enough funds to sustain their activities; recognises that grants are often given to short-term projects and that there is little support for activities to combat organised crime; recognises that short-term funding results in staff only being hired for project-specific purposes, which leads to a lack of stable employment standards and provides little space for staff to develop core skills, to the detriment of long-term strategic planning;

50. Commends the valuable work of investigative journalists reporting on high-profile cases and disclosing links between organised criminal groups, politicians and businesses; strongly condemns acts of aggression, including targeted killings, intimidation, hate speech and slander campaigns against investigative journalists and civil society; notes with particular concern cases of hate speech and slander campaigns by state officials, MPs and the representatives of governments, ruling parties and media owned or partially financed by the state; calls on the authorities and law enforcement to ensure that investigative journalists and civil society are protected and can work unhindered and urges that all forms of hate speech targeting minorities and vulnerable groups, especially those of national or ethnic origins, be punished; reiterates its call on the Commission and the European External Action Service to strengthen their cooperation with and support for civil society, NGOs, reform-oriented policymakers, academia and independent media on the ground; encourages the Commission and the local EU delegations to work together with local stakeholders to enhance procedures for the regular trial monitoring of corruption and organised crime cases;

51. Deeply regrets the increasing number of cases of strategic litigation against public participation (SLAPPs), which are often used to threaten journalists and individuals in order to prevent them from exposing the wrongdoings of those in power; calls on the Western Balkan authorities to significantly increase their work to ensure the transparency of media ownership and the independence of newsrooms and to safeguard media freedom from political interference, as key elements in a free and democratic society that are essential for the success of the fight against organised crime and corruption;

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52. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the governments and parliaments of the Member States and the Western Balkan countries.
