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**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Enlargement Package 2023 – Western Balkans
and Türkiye**

(Own-initiative opinion)

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Reference documents:	Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy COM(2023) 690 final (SWD(2023) 690 final) – (SWD(2023) 691 final) – (SWD(2023) 692 final) – (SWD(2023) 693 final) – (SWD(2023) 694 final) – (WD(2023) 695 final) – (SWD(2023) 696 final) Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – New growth plan for the Western Balkans COM(2023) 691 final

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR),

General comments

1. acknowledges with great interest the European Commission's 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, the reports on candidate countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye, and that on Kosovo ⁽¹⁾ as a potential candidate, also on Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia on their respective paths towards accession to the European Union, as well as the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans;
2. emphasises the geostrategic significance of EU enlargement – which has historically been the most effective EU foreign policy instrument – to all Western Balkans countries and supports it as a merit-based process and an investment in long-term peace, stability, security and prosperity across the continent;
3. considers it essential for the EU to keep revitalising its enlargement strategy by providing significant incentives to encourage reforms, and to keep supporting gradual integration in sectors such as the single market and in the energy, digital and green transitions. In return, it is expected that candidate countries and the potential candidate actively demonstrate their commitment and political will by implementing the reforms necessary for meeting all the criteria for accession and taking ownership of their EU integration journey; in this regard takes note of the European Commission's communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews of 20 March 2024 ⁽²⁾; notes that, while in this document the Commission supports the approach of gradual integration, it fails to recognise the role to be played by the sub-national level in this respect;

⁽¹⁾ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution UNSCR 1244/1999 and the International Court of Justice opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

⁽²⁾ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews (COM(2024) 146 final).

4. stresses the importance of further efforts across the region in key areas of the rule of law, such as the fight against corruption and organised crime, as well as media freedoms, gender equality and gender-based violence and minority rights;
5. notes the essential role of the EU's financial and policy support in successfully addressing the developments in and challenges faced by the region, and welcomes the proposed EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans as an important step in unleashing the Western Balkans' full potential in terms of economic and social development, and bringing forward some of the advantages and further reform incentives of EU membership before accession;
6. calls for a swift roll-out of the growth plan and prompt adoption of the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, while ensuring the inclusive and transparent programming and implementation of the future facility in all countries in the region, with open monitoring of performance indicators and fulfilling the conditionality criteria for the use of available funds;
7. highlights and is committed to continue its ongoing and increased involvement of the CoR in the enlargement process via its joint consultative committees, working groups, and the organisation of the annual Enlargement Day conference; underlines the importance of ensuring political plurality in these bodies as well as active participation from both sides in the exchanges, which are an integral part of the accession process;
8. stresses the need for effective EU support for strategic communication at local level in the countries of the region to highlight the benefits of EU integration and counter disinformation;
9. recognises the importance of an enabling environment for the development of independent and diverse civil society and an independent media to support local democracy and EU accession-related reforms;
10. underscores the critical importance that enlargement countries align with the EU's common foreign and security policy (CFSP), as this reflects a deep commitment to EU values, reinforcing these countries' dedication to the shared principles and strategic objectives that underpin the EU's external actions and security agenda;
11. emphasises the importance of promoting regional cooperation among Western Balkans countries and constructive and peaceful approaches to resolving open bilateral issues, including by city diplomacy and cross-border cooperation, while warning against the dangerous and unacceptable ideas of redrawing the borders in the region;

Country-specific observations

ALBANIA

12. recognises Albania's continued efforts towards EU integration and commends its strong commitment to completing the screening process at the start of the EU accession negotiations;
13. acknowledges the progress achieved towards comprehensive justice reform and the vetting process, and underlines the importance of further efforts in key areas of the rule of law, such as the fight against corruption and organised crime;
14. welcomes Albania's full alignment with the EU CFSP positions, which is a strong signal of the country's strategic commitment to its EU path;
15. notes the independent observers' positive assessment of the regular local elections held in 2023, but also the need for further improvement in the electoral process and for increasing political participation; urges the political actors to step up their commitment to dialogue and to strengthen democratic institutions;
16. highlights concerns regarding media independence, pluralism, including challenges posed by political and business interests;
17. commends Albania's constructive approach towards ensuring legal procedures for migration to the EU, and the commitment to update its relevant framework with the EU acquis;
18. acknowledges progress in local governance and decentralisation, emphasising the need for continued efforts to increase the administrative capacity and fiscal autonomy of local government units;

19. highlights advancements and ongoing challenges protecting minority rights, including the need for a more effective implementation of relevant policies at the local level; welcomes the adoption of the secondary legislation on minorities and continues to urge Albania to swiftly adopt and implement the related remaining by-laws relating to the 2017 framework law on the protection of persons belonging to national minorities in line with European standards and with the involvement of all relevant stakeholders; encourages the implementation of a comprehensive land sector reform and the consolidation of property rights in a transparent manner, including by holding consultations with all relevant stakeholders, including by addressing cases of falsification of documents and swiftly advancing the process for registration and compensation; encourages Albania to complete all processes related to the national census in full transparency and in line with international standards;
20. expresses its concern at the arrest (and the first degree conviction) of the new mayor of Chimara, Freddy Beleris, on the eve of the municipal elections in May, which both violated the presumption of innocence and prevented the mayor-elect from taking office, as he remains imprisoned to this day; underlines that this matter is linked to overall respect for fundamental rights, the pending issue of the properties of members of the Greek ethnic minority in the municipal area and the accusations of encroachments by the State;
21. reiterates the importance of pursuing public administration reform, focusing on the need for merit-based recruitment and improved transparency, especially at the local level;
22. commends municipalities which have approved local gender action plans and encourages further efforts to systematically reflect women's needs, rights and entitlements in the legal and policy frameworks at the local level;
23. notes that the Consultative Council's role as the main forum for institutional dialogue and coordination between central and local governments needs to be strengthened, especially in engaging Local Government Units (LGUs) and local government associations in the early phases of legislative initiatives;
24. eagerly awaits the creation of a Joint Consultative Committee to intensify cooperation between Albania's local and regional authorities and those represented in the European Committee of the Regions;
25. calls for the full implementation and monitoring of the Directives on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) as well as for enhancing public participation and consultation in decision-making, particularly at local level;

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

26. welcomes the decision of the European Council to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, acknowledging the important progress achieved after candidate status was granted in December 2022;
27. notes a series of positive developments at the state level which are in stark contrast to negative developments at the level of the Republika Srpska entity, which impact the country as a whole;
28. highlights the need for stronger action on the remaining priorities set out in the European Commission's Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023 Report and the Commission's recommendation of 12 October 2022, in order to fulfil the criteria for adopting the negotiating framework by the Council;
29. commends Bosnia and Herzegovina for taking significant steps to improve the judiciary and prosecutorial system, the fight against corruption, organised crime and terrorism and to improve migration management, with the approval of a mandate to negotiate a Frontex status agreement;
30. calls on Bosnia and Herzegovina to implement the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights and the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and to amend the electoral law so that the three constituent peoples are legitimately represented in the state institutions and that all citizens can be elected to any institution.
31. notes the formation of new executive bodies in 2023 and urges stronger coordination on EU matters and the adoption of reforms, in line with EU standards;
32. expresses concern regarding Republika Srpska's legislative initiatives, which threaten fundamental freedoms and contradict constitutional jurisprudence;

33. emphasises the need for legislative and institutional reforms, particularly in the areas of freedom of association, media freedom and the fight against corruption; calls on the authorities to promote and ensure a conducive environment for an independent and diverse civil society;
34. recommends the establishment of a joint consultative committee with the CoR to ensure the systematic involvement of LRAs in the EU accession process;
35. encourages more intensified efforts towards EU integration, focusing on the implementation of EU accession reforms and strengthening regional cooperation and stability;

KOSOVO

36. welcomes the start of the long-awaited EU visa liberalisation scheme allowing Kosovo nationals to travel to Europe's borderless zone;
37. notes the violent attack against the Kosovo Police and the ongoing crises in northern Kosovo, including challenges to freedom of movement, and underlines the need for stability and peaceful resolution of political tensions;
38. expresses concern about the low turnout and boycott of local elections, highlighting the need for inclusive governance in the north;
39. calls on the Commission to persevere in finding solutions regarding the establishment of an association of Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo (with the European Committee of the Regions offering concrete support and cooperation based on its role and expertise); with a view to fully implementing the 2013 Brussels Agreement between Serbia and Kosovo;
40. acknowledges progress towards normalising relations with Serbia, and urges the government to implement the signed agreements effectively to advance on the European path;
41. stresses the importance of improving local government service delivery, addressing disparities across municipalities and further strengthening government-municipality cooperation;
42. urges efforts to enhance female participation in local governance and decision-making processes;
43. emphasises the importance of adopting integrity plans in the public service to prevent corruption, including at the municipal level;

MONTENEGRO

44. recognises Montenegro's commitment to EU integration and the new government's commitment to move swiftly towards the conclusion of the negotiations;
45. notes Montenegro's continuous alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy, addressing challenges from foreign disinformation campaigns;
46. urges political actors to achieve broad political consensus on key reforms, particularly in the area of the rule of law;
47. encourages the government to enhance efforts and accelerate reforms in the EU accession negotiations, with a focus on meeting benchmarks in Chapters 23 and 24;
48. stresses the need for transparent and accountable actions in fighting corruption and depoliticising public administration at all levels;
49. recognises Montenegro's effective actions against organised crime, but also calls for urgent improvements in handling organised crime cases in the judicial system;
50. underlines the limited progress made in public administration reform; acknowledges the adoption of a new public finance management reform programme but also highlights the lack of changes to civil service legislation;
51. notes the adoption of amendments to the law on local self-government, introducing relaxed qualification requirements and ample discretion for appointing authorities to dismiss heads of administrative bodies, thus disregarding the European Commission's recommendation on harmonising that law with civil service legislation;
52. calls on the European Commission to support Montenegro in ensuring transparent and inclusive policy-making and enhancing the quality of public stakeholder consultations;
53. urges sustained attention to public finance transparency, considering Montenegro's external financial vulnerability;

NORTH MACEDONIA

54. recognises the smooth progress of the EU accession screening process, underscoring North Macedonia's commitment to EU integration;
55. stresses the importance of continued efforts in strengthening democracy and the rule of law, addressing OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations;
56. calls for political actors to work collaboratively for national reform, overcoming polarisation and fatigue in the enlargement process;
57. highlights the limited progress in local self-government reforms, particularly in fiscal decentralisation and interinstitutional dialogue, and urges improvements in municipal financial stability and setting up permanent cooperation mechanisms with the aim of reviving interinstitutional dialogue between different levels of government, particularly concerning the EU accession negotiations process;
58. raises serious concerns regarding prevalent corruption and delays in processing high-level corruption cases, with possible further negative spill-over in this area caused by recent amendments to the Criminal Code, which reduced the maximum legal penalties for specific corruption-related criminal offences;
59. recommends reforms to protect journalists and strengthen public broadcasting independence and financial sustainability;
60. calls for strengthening cross-institutional mechanisms for implementing and monitoring gender equality policy with an improved structure, technical capacity, adequate funding and trained professionals;
61. welcomes the country's full alignment with the EU CFSP positions, confirming its strategic choice of EU accession;
62. commends North Macedonia's active role in regional initiatives and cooperation, contributing to regional stability and EU integration objectives; notes that good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation remain essential elements of the enlargement process, as well as of the Stabilisation and Association Process; recalls the importance of achieving tangible results and implementing in good faith bilateral agreements, including the Prespa agreement with Greece and the Treaty on Friendship, Good-neighbourliness and Cooperation with Bulgaria.
63. recommends taking concrete measures to reduce air and water pollution at local and national levels, operationalising the regional waste management system in the eastern and north-eastern regions, implementing the Paris Agreement, including by adopting a Climate Law, consistent with the EU Climate Law; and adopting the national climate adaptation plan;

SERBIA

64. highlights the need for further efforts in reforms for accession to the EU, especially in the rule of law, media freedoms and in normalising relations with Kosovo;
65. welcomes that Serbia made steps to strengthen the independence and accountability of the judiciary with the timely adoption of the legislation giving practical effect to the constitutional amendments of 2022;
66. calls on Serbia to align with the EU's common foreign and security policy and to implement restrictive measures against the Russian Federation;
67. expresses concern about the decreasing trend in public support for EU membership in Serbia reaching the lowest ever numbers;
68. notes the adoption of the programme for reform of the local government system 2021-2025, which aims to address shortcomings in the functioning of local governments, and underlines that implementation is key;
69. notes that local governance and administrative capacity need to be strengthened, addressing disparities between municipalities and regrets that local authorities continue to remain weak;
70. underlines the importance of ensuring multi-level governance and the respect of decisions, taken at the responsible level;
71. encourages Serbia to intensify its fight against corruption and organised crime, emphasising the importance of transparency and accountability at all levels of governance;

72. welcomes that Serbia prepared and adopted new media legislation whose implementation can significantly improve the regulatory environment. Nonetheless, highlights the importance of the free media and raises concerns over the fact that convicted war criminals are continuing to spread hate speech in State-controlled media;
73. stresses that the concerns raised about election processes need to be addressed, especially those regarding irregularities noted in the Belgrade elections;
74. welcomes that Serbia has remained engaged in the EU-facilitated Dialogue on normalisation of relations with Kosovo, and agrees that it needs to demonstrate more serious commitment, invest more efforts and make compromises to take the process of normalisation of relations with Kosovo forward;
75. calls for the full implementation and monitoring of the Directives on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) as well as for enhancing public participation, consultation and transparency in decision-making, particularly at local level;

TÜRKIYE

76. expresses serious concerns about the deterioration of the democratic standards, the rule of law and the fundamental rights and values enshrined in the EU Treaties; insists that Türkiye steps up its cooperation with the Council of Europe and fully implements the European Convention of Human Rights, as well as executes all judgments of the European Court of Human Rights in line with Article 46 of the convention; calls on Türkiye to align itself with the EU's CFSP positions and restrictive measures adopted in response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine;
77. reaffirms that it is in the EU's strategic interest to develop a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with Türkiye in essential areas of joint interest, such as counterterrorism, trade, economy, energy, food security, migration and transport; stresses the importance of keeping channels of communication open in order to resolve differences and ease tensions through dialogue and in accordance with EU and international law;
78. while welcoming the Joint Communication on the state of play of our political, economic and trade relations with Türkiye, calls for a bolder involvement of the EU to achieve a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus issue following the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions; condemns Türkiye's unilateral steps in Varosha and invites Türkiye to make further progress towards normalising relations with the Republic of Cyprus, while stressing the need to avoid any further unilateral actions that could raise tensions and undermine prospects for a peaceful settlement;
79. praises the important work of the bi-communal Committee on Missing Persons and calls on Türkiye to enhance its efforts in providing crucial information from its military archives, as well as access to witnesses in closed-off areas; calls on Türkiye to cooperate with the relevant international organisations, especially the Council of Europe, in preventing and combating illicit trafficking and the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage; condemns the repeated attempts by Türkiye to intimidate and gag Turkish Cypriot journalists and progressive citizens in the Turkish Cypriot community, thus violating their right to freedom of opinion and expression; calls on Türkiye to fully respect the fundamental rights of enclaved Greek Cypriots, including educational rights.
80. emphasises issues regarding the centralisation of powers – which undermines political pluralism – and pressure on opposition parties;
81. underlines the weakening of local democracy due to government pressure on opposition mayors, impacting judicial independence and local governance;
82. reiterates serious concerns regarding the continued practice of forcibly dismissing elected mayors and replacing them with government-appointed officials, as well as the arrests of other local representatives, and stresses the need for Türkiye to revise the legal framework governing locally elected officials to align with the European Charter of Local Self-Government;
83. calls for progress in public administration and judiciary reform, noting serious backsliding and unaddressed structural deficiencies;
84. urges progress towards a political resolution of the Kurdish issue and better support for civil society;
85. calls on Türkiye to re-accede to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence;

86. recommends steps towards more constructive engagement in key areas like the customs union and visa policy, while defending the interests of the EU and its Member States;
87. commends Türkiye's continued significant efforts in hosting and addressing the needs of almost four million refugees; calls on Türkiye to ensure the full and non-discriminatory implementation of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, including vis-à-vis the Republic of Cyprus; including its obligation to take any necessary measures to prevent new sea or land routes for illegal migration opening from Türkiye to the EU, and to cooperate with neighbouring states; further calls for the full and effective implementation of the EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement vis-à-vis all Member States; notes that it will not accept any attempt by third countries to instrumentalise migrants for political purposes; stresses the need for Türkiye to align with the EU visa policy.
88. highlights the substantial impact of the February 2023 earthquakes and acknowledges the EU's emergency assistance;
89. welcomes the de-escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean, which needs to be sustained;

The role of LRAs in the enlargement process

90. highlights the essential role of LRAs in implementing the EU-acquis-related reforms, and emphasises the need for effective cooperation and involvement in enlargement-related matters;
91. emphasises the utmost importance of EU financial assistance to LRAs in enlargement countries for upgrading their administrative capacities and for improving opportunities and living conditions in their local communities;
92. stresses that all administration capacity-building programmes at the central level should be parallel and mirrored at the local and regional level, and encourages the use of EU capacity-building tools, such as TAIEX, for institutional development at the local level and to foster twinning between cities in the EU and candidate countries;
93. underlines the importance of the active engagement of LRAs in programming and monitoring the implementation of new EU support instruments, such as the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, the Digital and Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, and the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans;
94. calls on the European Commission to refine indicators for measuring progress in public administration reforms, including more precise performance indicators concerning the role of LRAs, such as fiscal decentralisation, administrative cooperation and multi-level governance, the empowerment of local and regional authorities to develop and provide quality services to the general public and businesses, and the promotion of inclusive and evidence-based policy-making at local and regional levels;
95. underlines the importance of the active involvement of LRAs in monitoring EU financial assistance. Proper and inclusive monitoring of EU financial assistance would provide quality assurance and visibility;
96. recommends that the European Commission establish direct communication and cooperation with LRAs through existing regional networks, such as NALAS;
97. acknowledges the role of LRAs in successfully managing migration challenges in the countries of the region; calls for programmes to be developed to improve the skills and capacities of local stakeholders (especially local government units) to receive migrants and refugees and encourage their sociocultural participation in local host societies, and create an environment conducive for social interaction and peaceful co-existence;
98. highlights the role of LRAs in driving local economic development and improving the business climate, and advocates for more structured dialogues and consultations with municipalities in implementing regional cooperation initiatives.

Brussels, 18 April 2024.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions
Vasco ALVES CORDEIRO