



## Joint Statement

### by the Friends of the Western Balkans (FoWB)

We, the Friends of the Western Balkans – consisting of representatives of the European social democratic community, including members of national and European parliaments, political foundations, political parties and civil society organisations in the region – have convened for our sixth meeting in Brussels, with the aim to bring together progressive and social democratic actors, and reaffirm our unwavering commitment to the integration of the six Western Balkan countries into the European Union.

In the context of ongoing global challenges to democracy, the recent European Parliament elections have highlighted the growth of far-right forces across Europe. Donald Trump's victory in the recent US presidential elections may dramatically change the future direction of American foreign policy and the US support for the multilateral order. The outcome of the US elections could also significantly impact the Western Balkans, influencing both regional dynamics and the EU's broader engagement with the region.

In addition, this year's elections in North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia have shown that progressive forces still face significant obstacles in their efforts to counter the rise of nationalist forces. This situation highlights the urgent need for renewed support and strategic alliances to strengthen democratic governance and social justice throughout the region.

As members of the progressive family, we are committed to opposing the rise of nationalism, authoritarianism and right-wing extremism, and will continue to promote fair and democratic electoral processes.

In light of these developments:

- We reaffirm our unwavering **commitment to the full integration** of the six Western Balkan countries into the European Union. We urge the new European Commission to pursue this objective actively and work closely with the WB6 countries to facilitate a more rapid path towards full integration.
- We commend the European Commission for endorsing the reform agendas of Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, following the EU member states' favourable assessments. This endorsement is key to disbursing funds from the EU's €6 billion **Reform and Growth Facility**. We urge the countries of the region to seize the opportunities offered by the Growth Plan, while remaining committed to implementing the essential reforms needed to enhance economic development, promote regional economic integration and progress towards access to the single market. In particular, we strongly encourage Bosnia and Herzegovina's authorities to formally submit their

reform agenda to start the assessment process and continue to receive the necessary support to finalise this agenda, for the benefit of all citizens.

- We welcome the results of this year's **Berlin Process** meeting, where the WB6 Prime Ministers signed the Declaration of Support for the Common Regional Market Action Plan 2025-2028, as well as the Agreement on Access to Higher Education and Admission to Higher Studies. We also celebrate the unblocking of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), recognising it as an essential component for implementing the Common Regional Market. We also welcome the decision by Kosovo's authorities to unilaterally abolish the visa requirement for citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina as of next year. We urge the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina to reciprocate this initiative.
- We encourage continued joint efforts between the European institutions and the governments of the Western Balkans to protect **democratic and fair electoral processes**.
- We reiterate our call on EU member states and WB countries' governments to **refrain from bilateral interference**, as such actions jeopardise the significant progress achieved in the integration process and undermine democratic values.
- We urge the EU member states to commit to **internal reforms** within the Union and allow the use of **qualified majority voting** for decisions related to the enlargement process.
- We encourage progressive and social democratic forces within the WB6 to actively engage in **addressing common regional challenges** through intensified inter-party dialogue and engagement with civil society actors and social movements.
- We urge the authorities in the EU member states to engage with their electorates to allay fears of enlargement fuelled by the far right and to promote European civic education.
- We call on the European institutions and the Western Balkan countries to develop and promote mechanisms to facilitate the better **integration of migrant workers**. This should include ensuring full access to social security and labour rights, establishing EU-wide rules for employment agencies, facilitating residence in the EU for job seekers, allowing cross-border trade union membership and promoting the dissemination of clear and accurate information on migration processes.
- We encourage **Bosnia and Herzegovina** to implement significant reforms in line with the EU proposals and expect rigorous monitoring by the European Commission to maximise the benefits of the Growth Plan.
- We again urge the European institutions to support **Kosovo's** membership of the Council of Europe and call on the European Council to grant Kosovo candidate status in recognition of its longstanding

commitment to EU integration. We also encourage all EU member states to take concrete steps to resolve all bilateral issues with Kosovo, including but not limited to the recognition of its statehood.

- We express our deep concern about the erosion of civil and political freedoms and the electoral process in **Serbia**, confirmed by reports of electoral fraud in this year's parliamentary and local elections; condemn the Serbian government's continued non-alignment with EU foreign policy and its ethno-nationalist rhetoric, which threatens regional stability; and call for clear political signals, backed up by diplomatic and economic measures, in the absence of improvement on the above issues.
- We welcome the formal opening of the first accession negotiations with **Albania** and urge the Albanian authorities to continue on their reform path to join the Single Euro Payments Area as early as next year. We also call on the Albanian authorities to ensure that civil and political liberties are not eroded during this crucial period.
- We recognise that **Montenegro** is currently the only candidate country in the final stage of accession negotiations, having received a positive Interim Benchmark Assessment Report in June. With a clear roadmap endorsed by the European Commission, Montenegro is on track to close all negotiation chapters by the end of 2026. We urge the Montenegrin authorities to remain firmly committed to Euro-Atlantic integration and close four negotiation chapters by the end of this year to become the 28th member of the EU by 2028. We condemn any attempts to undemocratically influence government decisions.
- We urge **North Macedonia** to proceed swiftly with the necessary constitutional changes to maintain the momentum of its EU accession process and to work towards opening the next chapter of accession talks with the EU as soon as possible. In this context, we also call on the **Bulgarian authorities** to resolve all outstanding bilateral issues in a spirit of good neighbourly relations.

As the European social democratic family, we will not be mere spectators, but active participants and committed advocates of social democratic and European values!

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