

ETUC position on the EU enlargement

Adopted at the Executive Committee Meeting of 17-18 December 2019

The ETUC continues to believe that all European States which respect the values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, in line with the EU Treaty¹ and are committed to promoting them, may become members of the Union.

The Vienna Congress underlined in particular that ETUC has, for a number of years, supported Turkish accession. We accept that this will nevertheless only be possible if fundamental rights and freedoms are respected. Therefore, specific attention is devoted to human and trade union rights in Turkey. The Executive Committee urges the European Commission and Member States to press the Turkish authorities to ensure full respect for freedom of expression, speech and media; and full respect for the rule of law, democracy and justice; ensure the right to fair, independent trial and appeal procedures for the tens of thousands dismissed or suspended workers and public employees.

In the on-going negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro, the European Commission should insist for faster progress on workers' and trade union rights, on collective bargaining between trade unions and employers, and in improving social conditions. As frontrunners Montenegro and Serbia should make EU accession a success for the people by strengthening social rights and standards.

The last ETUC Executive Committee in October strongly criticised the decision of the European Council not to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. Taking into account the fact that both countries meet the EU's requirements for opening accession negotiations stated by the European Commission recommendations² and their endorsement by the European Parliament³, we consider that a further delay of the decision by the Council might lead not only to widespread frustration of public opinion in these countries, but also undermine their political situation and commitment to European integration. Furthermore, the EU institutions should not neglect the preparation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo for their potential EU accession.

In this context, recognising that the integration of the Western Balkans is in the EU's interest and that the enlargement policy has been one of the most effective policy instruments, we consider that the debate on the reform of the process (which took place in the Council) should not be used to delay the decision, so eagerly anticipated by the

¹ Articles 2 and 49 TEU

² On NM see: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY_19_2777,

on Albania see https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/COUNTRY_19_2775

³ EP resolution of 24 October 2019 on opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania

people in both countries. The delay could be seen as non-respect of the EU promises and commitments and would further undermine EU credibility.

With regard to the French government's non-paper on Reforming the European Union accession process⁴, we believe that the proposal to organise the negotiations around policy blocs as a base for several (seven) successive stages, where the opening of chapters in one bloc would only be possible only when the negotiation of the previous bloc of chapters is completed (so that the European acquis in these chapters would be adopted and implemented), would mean that the negotiation process would be considerably longer than is currently the case. Moreover, as the time of implementation of particular stages is not limited, this could lead to seven classes of membership and a multi-speed Union. We strongly disagree with this approach and consider that the opening of negotiations could have prompted Albania and North Macedonia to better address the challenges they are facing as well as to reaffirm the undeniable role of the social partners in building sustainable, inclusive and democratic societies.

We consider, as stressed already by the last ETUC Congress in May 2019, that the modalities of enlargement must be reviewed, in order to promote upward social convergence. In this sense, we welcome the proposals to reinforce the social dimension of the process, based on EU social convergence objectives and indicators, introduced in the non-paper on Reforming the European Union accession process.

We call on the European Commission to reshape the enlargement policy, by paying more attention to collective bargaining, social rights and protection, and their enforcement. The social dimension is already part of the accession negotiations, including minimum standards in the areas of labour law, equality, health and safety at work and anti-discrimination. Nevertheless, it should be given a higher place in the process to align national standards towards the best performances also in terms of equal opportunities in the labour market, fair working conditions, according to the Treaty art. 151 and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). Guaranteeing the involvement of trade unions through a genuine social dialogue must be a pre-condition to accession. In this respect, capacity building for social partners and removal of legal hurdles for sectoral bargaining and multiemployer collective bargaining are much needed.

EPSR sets a framework for EU policies for the years ahead. Since its adoption, it includes several principles which highlight the importance of social rights and it proposes a vision of a society that ensures progress, addressing transformations in the world of work that are challenging the sustainability of the European social model. In particular, the pillar should trigger upward convergence of working and living conditions in Europe which are the basis of the European integration process. In the accession process, social scoreboards can be used to assess progress. Though the inclusion of the EPSR and the social scoreboard in the Economic Reform Programmes is welcome as a first step, more attention is needed for wages and collective bargaining, social protection, and trade union involvement. ETUC further stresses the importance of building comprehensive

⁴ <https://g8fip1kplyr33r3krz5b97d1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Enlargement-nonpaper.pdf>

public services, good public administrations fighting corruption and establishing social protection systems in line with the EPSR.

We support a stronger political governance of the negotiation process. To this end, the European Commission and the governments of candidate countries should ensure full involvement of trade unions through social dialogue both at European level and in the countries concerned. Further, the Commission should appoint labour officers in EU delegations in the candidate countries.

We support also the proposal of reflection on a better articulation between the Berlin Process, the EU-Balkan summits and the meetings of the European Council. The social dimension should have more prominent role, and the involvement of Employment and Social Policy Ministers should be enhanced, along with more structured participation of the Social Partners.

Regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations, fully involving workers and their representatives, are essential for progress on the respective European paths and to guarantee sustainability of the EU project. The ETUC will continue to assist trade unions in candidate countries with initiatives helping them to successfully influence the accession process, and the last Congress confirmed the ETUC commitment to the implementation of the EU enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans. These initiatives would be more effective with better support from the European Commission for Trade Union activities and networks involved in the accession negotiations, as also emphasised in the common Statement of 9 May 2018 of the Western Balkan, Bulgarian, Croatian, Romanian and Slovenian trade unions.⁵

We understand that the state of the Union is a source of serious concerns. Brexit, rising populism, growing problems with the rule of law and democratic deficit in some countries, problems in respecting the Treaties and *acquis communautaire*, in particular inability of meeting the requirements of the Growth and Stability Pact is the background of the search for additional guaranties for the stability of the EU after future enlargements. However, it would be a mistake to blame candidate countries for these problems. Furthermore, creating additional conditions for the accession of new member states before putting our own house in order, would undermine our collective credibility.

⁵ *Declaration of the International Trade Union Conference "The Voice of Integration of Western Balkans", Sofia, 9 May 2018*