

CONFERENCE

The interparliamentary dialogue for further promotion of European integration in the Western Balkans

October 20, 2023, Skopje

Concluding remarks

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished participants,

As we conclude this key conference on inter-parliamentary dialogue, it is imperative that we consolidate our insights into a comprehensive set of conclusions that capture the essence of our deliberations. Discussions at today's sessions shed light on the urgent challenges, but also opportunities that pave the way to European integration in the Western Balkans. Let us share our common vision and determination to effectively address these challenges.

In the first session, we discussed the harsh geopolitical reality facing the Western Balkans. The region's increasing vulnerability to external influences, particularly from the Russian Federation, underscores the need for our unwavering vigilance. The presence of the Russian Federation through the tools of soft power, economic investments, increased presence in the media, energy policy represents a risk that can be a factor for worsening the existing divisions, but also for the instability of the region. Aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, through the shameless disregard of international law and European values, and through the brutal violation of human rights, signals the urgency of joint action by all the countries of the region.

In the Second Session, we explored the essential issue of public opinion. The time that has passed since the Summit in Thessaloniki in 2003, when the European perspective first became a real option for the region, showed that it is necessary to continuously work on becoming a member of the European Union. Although polls indicate an increased sense of pessimism regarding accession to the European Union, which is more pronounced among young people in the region, we must not allow to miss the unique opportunity of full membership in the union. There is no other better alternative than the European Union and there is no better time than now, and the strongest proof of that is the worrying growth of ethno-nationalism, from which our region is still healing the wounds. The memories of the destructive power of violence, born from nationalist policies are still fresh. The goal is clear, the Western Balkans belongs to the EU.

In the third session, we emphasized the great importance of international cooperation, especially between the Council of Europe and the European Union. The support of these organizations is essential for the European perspective of the region, but the intensification of political dialogue in the European integration process of the Western Balkans is more than necessary. Through a strategic approach, involving all

stakeholders, and especially civil society, it is necessary to rethink the support provided, with the aim of strengthening progress in key areas, namely the rule of law, democratic processes and respect for human rights.

Our unwavering commitment to the European integration of the Western Balkans represents a geostrategic investment in peace, stability and democratic security for the entire European continent. The Thessaloniki summit in 2003 marked a historic turning point, and the European Union's unequivocal support for the European perspective of the region remains firm. However, the slow pace and the insufficient validation of the key steps that required enormous political will, but also a sacrifice and which are not adequately rewarded, posed a challenge to us how to preserve the citizens' support for the union.

In conclusion, let us jointly and resolutely commit to remain strongly committed to our efforts in supporting the European integration of the Western Balkans, to make a political promise that the region will continue its journey in only one direction, towards the European Union. Together we will overcome the challenges and we will use the opportunities before us, for a better future for all citizens, for a better future for all young people.

Thank you for your valuable insights and dedicated participation in this Conference.