

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

As the EU-Western Balkans Summit is about to take place in Sofia on 17 May 2018, under the auspices of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, at which the EU is expected to reaffirm its commitment to the integration of its partners in the Western Balkan countries and once again emphasise the region's place within the European family:

- *we, as trade union confederation members of the **Regional Trade Union Council Solidarnost**, namely: Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions of Serbia, Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia, Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Croatia, Confederation of Trade Unions of the Republika Srpska, Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, TUC NEZAVISNOST, Confederation of Trade Unions of Montenegro, Union of Free Trade Unions of Montenegro, Federation of Trade Unions of Macedonia and Macedonian Confederation of Free Trade Unions;*
- ***together with** the Free Trade Union Confederation of Kosovo (BSPK), the Union of the Independent Trade Unions of Albania (BSPSH), CARTEL ALFA National Trade Union Confederation Romania, the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (CITUB) and the Confederation of Labour Podkrepa;*
- ***under the coordination** of the ETUC – European Trade Union Confederation;*
- *welcome the fact that the integration of Western Balkan countries is one of the EU priorities, and at a Conference on 'The Voice of Integration of the Western Balkans' held in Sofia, 9 May 2018, adopted the following declaration:*

**Declaration on New Labour and Social Dimensions of Western Balkans
Integration in the European Union**

Based on the fact that in Western Balkan countries, social partners are important social and economic actors and must be genuinely involved in the overall EU integration process, we call for the strengthening of their capacities by the supply of technical support and transparent inclusion in the EU integration process, particularly providing them with detailed and prompt information about the accession process. We also consider that it is very important for social partners in the Western Balkans to receive economic aid and access to European financial resources (EU Commission, European Investment Bank and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development) in order to establish functional and sustainable social dialogue. We think that laws subject to reforms during that process should not be introduced to governments and parliaments without being previously discussed thoroughly by social and economic councils. Such laws need to be introduced through normal, not fast-track procedures, and where there is a need for urgency, the participation of representative trade unions and employers' organisations must be guaranteed.

In the future EU integration process, we invite the competent European institutions to continue to remind governments in the region that by implementing the EU *social acquis* in the area of labour and social rights they should not implement only the minimum standards they prescribe, but should apply higher ones, whenever possible, and always in cooperation with representative social partners. We call for the European Social Rights Pillar to be at the heart of the process of legislative harmonization in all its 20 priority areas to ensure decent minimum social protection floors in the candidate countries.

In the future EU integration process, it is necessary to provide for documents related to accession negotiations (primarily analytical reports and translations of the EU *acquis*) to be available, as well as to use the webpages of EU Delegations in the region for publishing the criteria necessary for the opening and closing of chapters. Representative social partners should actively participate in all expert and work groups which prepare negotiations on particular chapters and in all specific groups dealing with issues which are within the competence of social/economic councils. In this case, it would be extremely useful if the experience gained from the work of the 13 Joint Consultative Committees during the pre-accession period of the countries that joined the EU (2004-2013) is used by the new candidate countries.

When harmonising national and EU legislation it is necessary to analyse all possible social consequences of the amendments, especially their impact on vulnerable parts of the population and on workers' rights, social protection systems, social dialogue and industrial relations. In this context, social partners should be involved in setting legal frameworks and capacity building measures, aimed at supporting upward convergence of working conditions and social inclusion, as well as developing efficient tripartite dialogue, social dialogue and collective bargaining.

By joining the ETUC Pay Rise Campaign and the Wage Convergence Alliance, we emphasize that this process should be implemented at company, national, regional and EU levels. Possible measures for prevention of brain-drain and limitation of migration outflows from the region are: better use of pull-push factors and wages in the EU-based multinational companies' branches fully implementing the principle of equal pay for equal work.

We invite the EU to cooperate closely with social partners in order to develop the mechanism for pre-accession funds facilitating the direct participation of trade unions and employers' organisations in the areas important for economic and social development, first and foremost in education. We demand more active involvement of trade unions in economic reforms and in reforms of labour markets, especially those aimed at reducing the gap between supply and demand in the labour force and high levels of unemployment.

We expect the so-called 'Connectivity Agenda' (transport, communication, energy, education, digital) to create well-functioning and fully integrated infrastructure networks both in the Western Balkans region itself and between it and the EU. And since this is about attracting major investments and potential opportunities for creating huge numbers of jobs, we insist that the social partners in the region and individual countries are consulted on the Connectivity Agenda.

Similarly, the trade unions and employers' organisations from the Western Balkans should be included as active partners in identifying the right skills needed for the new jobs, better planning and linking policies in the fields of education, training and employment resulting from digitisation and Industry 4.0 in the region. We believe that, in the process of accession, new technologies and innovation must be backed up by strong economic and financial policies and fair tax systems that adequately fund social security.

Migrant workers from the region employed in EU countries must be guaranteed the right to work under the same conditions as workers in the destination countries, prohibiting exploitation and ensuring full equal treatment and sound integration policies, which should involve social partners.

Within the process of judicial reform, the national authorities in the region should make efforts to speed up the settlement of labour disputes and whenever possible, establish special court departments authorised to deal with labour legislation issues.

Sofia, 9 May 2018