



Declaration
Building progressive, prosperous and stable societies
on the path to EU accession
Sofia 10-11 May 2015

In the last two decades the PES has actively worked with sister parties in the Western Balkans to promote further European integration as well as social democratic values such as solidarity, social justice, and respect for fundamental rights and freedoms.

The economic and financial crisis has left its mark in Europe, and particularly in the Western Balkans: unemployment numbers have risen significantly and social guarantees are under pressure. Some countries, both within and outside the EU are struggling to uphold basic human rights such as freedom of press and the independence of the judiciary.

The conflicts in the East and in the South of the EU create new risks for the stability in South East Europe. **Robust cooperation between the countries in the region and stronger EU commitment can provide a solid answer to the security, political and energy challenges ahead.**

In order to advance our cooperation with the Western Balkans, the PES would like to highlight the following priorities:

1. Guaranteeing the European integration of the Western Balkans

We, European Socialists and Democrats, believe that **a real prospect for EU accession is of vital importance for Western Balkans countries.** As the political family most committed to Western Balkan countries' EU accession, we have proven our unequivocal support for the prospect of EU membership in the region over the last years. Not only does this represent a continuation and expansion of the European project of peace, it can also strengthen the social and economic prosperity to both old and new member states.

Twelve years have passed since the EU showed its commitment to acceding and candidate states in Thessaloniki. The prospective of EU membership for the Western Balkans needs to be renewed and strengthened. We cannot let the momentum slip away any further; the path to EU accession is the only way forward. **We need to encourage governments and parties of aspiring EU member states to implement the necessary reforms, thus giving solid arguments for the pro-enlargement forces.** We also want to stimulate parties in the region to work together and continue their constructive dialogue.

2. Countering the decline of fundamental freedoms in the region

One of the main purposes of the EU's enlargement policy has always been to create a stable and democratic neighbourhood built on the principles of peace, freedom and human rights. While this initially gave impetus to essential democratic reforms, slow progress in negotiations and a loss of interest from the EU-side has led to a setback of the human rights agenda. Many countries have relapsed, with authoritarian regimes on the rise in both new

and aspiring member states, and fundamental freedoms at risk. Media freedom is especially endangered.

The rise in nationalism and authoritarianism is not an isolated issue; both EU and non-EU members have experienced a rise in extremist voices, which, driven by populist messages and a faltering economy, have thrived, to the expense of traditional, democratic, political parties.

A rise in extremism and nationalism is a challenge we commonly face. **As European Socialists and Democrats we should continue to promote fair and inclusive societies, based on human rights and fundamental freedoms.** The rise of right wing and populist parties cannot lead us to abandon our basic common values. Especially now, we need to make a difference and reach out to people with our progressive messages.

3. Increasing security and energy independence

Two major international crises are taking place simultaneously in close proximity to the Balkans - Ukraine and the so-called Islamic State. These conflicts raise concerns about the irreversibility of the stability and security in the region achieved in the past 10-15 years.

The PES wants a stable and secure Europe. We cannot allow rising global insecurity to derail the Western Balkans from their path towards further development and integration in the EU. Neither can we accept any attempt to fuel sentiments of nationalism or ethnic and religious strife. **The PES encourages the EU and the Western Balkans to work together to ensure the stability and security of the region.** In order to foster stability we encourage further integration of the Western Balkans in the international networks.

We are in favour of the further diversification of the EU's energy supplies and we believe that South East Europe (SEE) could play an important role here. **The PES will work together with its sister parties in the region to promote all Balkan countries as strong and reliable partners of the European Energy Union.** The PES will encourage the European Commission, in cooperation with the governments in SEE, to invest in the development of the energy infrastructure, particularly of the gas interconnectors and renewable energy sources. This way we will contribute to achieving a triple goal: increase energy security, create new growth and jobs and protect the environment.

4. Promoting social and economic development

Enlargement has always been an excellent tool to boost growth and employment in new and aspiring member states. It encourages countries to open up their markets, reform their economies and implement the necessary administrative reforms to create a favourable climate to promote growth and investment. Both old and new member states have benefited from the new dynamic created, with new consumers and markets entering the EU. At the same time the accession process has helped candidate countries to strengthen the social dimension of their development, introducing and applying high standards in social security policies, labour legislation and access to social services. PES remains vigilant that the people of candidate countries continue to use the opportunities for social welfare and progress both before and after accession.

While new member states have been severely affected by the impact of the financial and economic crisis and subsequent austerity policies, the consequences have been much more far-reaching in some of the Western Balkans countries. **Less than half of the active**

population has a job and the region has the highest levels of youth unemployment in Europe.

Young people are the motor of our societies and economies and they should be given every opportunity to fulfil their potential. The region's young populations can become a crucial asset for economic growth.

We, European Socialists and Democrats believe that we have to invest in youth. We need to train people in order to make their skills compatible with market demands. **Investments in innovation, energy and infrastructure together with closer integration and regional cooperation will pave the way to more robust economies.**

We believe in the consolidation of the welfare state in South East Europe based on the advancement of public services, including education, child care and health care to enhance the quality of people's lives and to ensure redistribution as well as social, economic and regional prosperity. The PES reiterates its determination to support the fight against poverty and social exclusion of the most disadvantaged in the region.

The challenges we face are often similar. Employment, security, energy security and fundamental rights are on top of all of our agendas. We are also jointly facing a decline in the popularity of social democratic parties. Together, we need to meet these challenges and find common solutions.