

DECLARATION

of the Regional Trade Union Council Solidarnost on the occasion of the Zagreb EU-Western Balkans Summit

„THE VOICE OF THE WESTERN BALKANS INTEGRATION IN THE SHADOW OF THE PANDEMIC“

Zagreb, May 25, 2020

EU-Western Balkans Summit was held this year virtually, **due to the Covid-19 pandemic**, on May 6 and was organised by the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the EU. Although this first Croatian presidency was conducted in extremely unfavourable conditions due to the internal crisis of the EU and the Covid-19 pandemic and its health, economic and social consequences, **nevertheless**, progress has been made regarding the further process of European integration.

We, the trade union confederations, members of the Regional Trade Union Council Solidarnost, as follows: THE UNION OF AUTONOMOUS TRADE UNIONS OF CROATIA, THE ASSOCIATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS OF SLOVENIA, THE CONFEDERATION OF AUTONOMOUS TRADE UNIONS OF SERBIA, TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION NEZAVISNOST, THE FEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS OF REPUBLIKA SRPSKA, THE CONFEDERATION OF INDEPENDENT TRADE UNIONS OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, THE CONFEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS OF MONTENEGRO, THE UNION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS OF MONTENEGRO, THE FEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS OF MACEDONIA and THE CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS OF MACEDONIA, in co-ordination with our umbrella European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), are adopting the Declaration of the Voice of the Western Balkans Integration in the shadow of the pandemic.

1. We welcome the opening of accession negotiations with Northern Macedonia and Albania, but at the same time regret the lack of a broader message of positive prospects and a clear framework for the future accession processes of the Western Balkan countries.
2. We are convinced that the effective enlargement of the European Union and the promotion of its values in the Western Balkans ensure security and stability, enhance social and economic development and prosperity, strengthen democracy and the rule of law, facilitate free movement of people and goods, stimulate investment policy and foster mobility. In that sense, a functional social dialogue at the national level is necessary.
3. Although the Zagreb Declaration calls for solidarity and unity, the Declaration unfortunately does not acknowledge and recognise social dialogue with trade unions and employers, collective bargaining, workers' participation and health and safety as key factors in responding to the crisis and ensuring economic and social rights.
4. We invite the leaders of the Western Balkans and the EU to engage in strengthening the social and economic component through mutual co-operation of social partners as equal actors in the reform process in the region, as well as to support efforts to build and further develop a non-fabricated, but institutionalised and functional social dialogue as one of the crucial elements of a

modern, democratic and European society. Constructive social dialogue and the inclusion of the social partners at all levels of the integration process must be very important and can be one of the criteria for an efficient integration process. We welcome **the prompt mobilisation of an investment package** to assist the Western Balkans in the fight against COVID-19 and post-pandemic recovery, which includes assistance to the health sector, as well as support for social and economic recovery. However, we emphasise that **adequate implementation, equal distribution among employers and workers, as well as the creation of new and preservation of existing quality jobs** are crucial. It is very **important to prevent the misuse of funds, as well as attempts to unilaterally change labour legislation to the detriment of workers, and further violation and derogation of acquired labour and social rights and standards.**

5. **Social partners must play an important role in the transition to a greener and more sustainable society.** Their role in shaping and implementing measures to promote a smart and intelligent, circular and low-carbon economy based on a fair transition approach is vital.
6. Precarious i.e. insecure jobs should be replaced by new, safe and quality ones in order to prevent the deterioration of the position of workers in a region that was unenviable even before the pandemic, especially when the level of wages and new forms of work are taken into account. The crisis caused by the corona virus showed **the value of the public sector and all workers** (including the ones in private sector) **for the functioning of society**, further confirmed systemic shortcomings in the field of workers' rights and pointed out the importance of certain branches for **daily functioning of the system. We invite employers to refrain from reducing salaries or laying off workers and, with state support, to work together to improve the position of workers in all sectors, and to thank certain sectors, especially health workers who fought hard on the first line of defense against the virus**, not only with applause or short-term stimulation, but **increased wages and improved working conditions.**
7. Quarantine confirmed that **Sunday** can be **non-working** for almost every sector, especially **trade**. We appeal to employers **to take into account working hours and the possibility of disconnecting** those who can work online from home. We refer to **the European Pillar of Social Rights**, which should support fair labour markets and social protection systems and their proper functioning. The pillar aims to create better living and working conditions in Europe, a decent standard and a decent life and work, and we invite the EU Member States and the countries of the Western Balkans to implement that without delay. **Respect and implementation of all principles of the European social pillar** (due to social dialogue) must be **one of the criteria for successful integration into the European Union.**
8. **We invite the governments and employers of the countries in the region and the EU to act responsibly towards the protection of the health, safety and protection of workers of both sexes** in essential services such as health, education, trade, utilities, the army and police, and all other jobs. The lack of protective equipment, non-compliance with the pronounced epidemiological protection measures and irresponsible behaviour of certain employers and authorities towards the area of safety and health at work results in a large number of infected people at the workplace and inadmissible number of the deceased. The issue of safety at work is particularly important in the context of the easing of restrictive measures and the return of workers to work. People, as the most important resource of a society, are not commodities, and once again we invite all the actors in the world of labour to take into account the care of a man who creates material value and on whose work the company's profit and, ultimately, the state budget depend. **We invite every country in the region and the EU to protect jobs and provide adequate income to all people affected by the crisis, as well as to invest in a full economic recovery in a dialogue with trade unions and employers.** Governments, unions and employers will play a crucial role in mitigating the effects of the crisis, ensuring the safety of individuals and the sustainability of businesses and jobs.

9. The Regional Trade Union Council **"Solidarnost"** welcomes the appeal to all Member States and those on the way to the EU on public investment for social and economic recovery. We support the recommendations of measures for the recovery and implementation of the UN climate action Green Agenda for the Balkans, social rights and UN development goals in order to eliminate inequalities and improve essential services and access to social protection. We welcome the shift in constructive investment in relation to rigid austerity measures after the 2008 crisis. **Solidarity** is essential in creating more socially just societies. Another crisis, this time caused by the corona virus, has shown that society is based on the world of labour and that its interests must be a priority in all areas, especially in the distribution of wealth and influence.

Work should be tailored to the working man and woman, and not exclusively to corporations and profits. More efforts are needed to create societies that would allow young people to stay and new opportunities for decent work and life in the region of returnees, seasonal workers in the EU due to the possibility of mobility and work based on visa-free regime. **Young people and women** must not be eternally marginalised, and the principle of **"equal pay for work of equal value"** should be strictly respected and more efforts should be made to prevent the exploitation of **migrant workers** in both the WB and the EU.

10. The crisis has clearly demonstrated the **unsustainability of the existing socio-economic system**. This crisis is an opportunity to make it clear that there is no going back to the old, but that it is time for a new direction of social and economic development. It must be more socially just, but ultimately seriously address the problem of the ecological sustainability of our planet. A new direction is needed both globally and at European level. **The new direction of socio-economic development must be based on the principles of economic democracy and social justice**. Taking into account both the economic and social dimensions, public policies must strengthen solidarity and social cohesion, and reduce poverty and social inequality. **The trade union members of the Regional Trade Union Council Solidarnost and the European Trade Union Confederation are ready to open a serious dialogue** on such a future.
11. We support the recommendations of the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs, stressing the importance of reforms with full membership as the ultimate goal, **calling for greater engagement with the Western Balkans countries, more efforts to counter corruption, reforming democratic institutions and the judiciary and promotion of regional co-operation, and transparent, proportional and non-discriminatory access to pre-accession funds**. We also strongly believe that **the Western Balkans** should be aligned and **included in important European policies and initiatives**, which, according to their geographical situation, is particularly the case with the European New Green Deal, and emphasises the importance of a robust **Green Agenda for the Western Balkans** in the framework of the Economic Development and Investment Plan for the WB, as this is in the interest of both the European Union and the Western Balkans. We consider that recovery from the universal health, economic and social Covid-19 crisis should include green policies as part of the post-pandemic EU response.