



To the Heads of Government / State in the Western Balkans

Aleksandar Vučić, President of the Republic of Serbia
 Zoran Tegeltija, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina
 Zdravko Krivokapić, Prime Minister-designate of Montenegro
 Edi Rama, Prime Minister of the Republic of Albania
 Avdullah Hoti, Prime Minister of Kosovo¹
 Zoran Zaev, Prime Minister of the Republic of North Macedonia

To the EU Commissioners in charge of the Green Agenda for the Balkans

Executive Vice-President of the European Commission Frans Timmermans
 EU Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries Virginijus Sinkevičius
 EU Commissioner for Energy, Kadi Simson
 High Representative / Vice President, Josep Borrell Fontelles
 EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi

Joint civil society statement in the wake of the Sofia Summit

Make the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans drive the transition to a sustainable, carbon-neutral wellbeing economy that works for people

The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans has the potential to drive the transition towards a sustainable, carbon-neutral economy oriented at planetary health and peoples' wellbeing. The aim of the Agenda, which comes as part of a 9 billion Euro Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, is to stimulate the economies in the Western Balkan while bringing the region up to standard with the EU's environmental standards and climate objectives, reducing corruption and strengthening democracy.

We, civil society organisations from the Western Balkans and European networks of environmental citizens' organisations, support the EU's efforts to translate the objectives of the European Green Deal to the situation in the Balkans. We **welcome the new momentum**

that the Green Agenda can bring to raise the ambition for environmental protection and climate action in the region. We call on all governments in the Western Balkans to endorse the Green Agenda and its objectives and to commit to its realisation. Civil society is ready to watch over the implementation of the Green Agenda, to monitor if all investments support the green transition and to hold governments to account.

However, the Agenda has already fallen behind its own ideals. There has been a **clear lack of public participation during the design** of the Agenda. There was no inclusive and transparent consultation process with many environmental NGOs in the region not having been informed or consulted. The general public is mostly unaware of the Agenda's existence. From those NGOs which had the opportunity to provide input to the process, only [few proposals have been taken on board](#).

It is of utmost importance to tap into the expertise of environmental organisations in the region. The Green Agenda and the Economic and Investment Plan must be aligned with the EU's environmental and climate objectives. While it needs to strengthen environmental protections, it must also benefit vulnerable groups and contribute to tackling root causes of inequality. In particular, women, young people and older people, low-income groups and the rural population, ethnic and religious minorities including Roma communities should have been consulted from the outset together with environmental NGOs – and **must now be given a clear role during the Agenda's implementation and Investment Plan's roll-out**.

Secondly, the Green Agenda comes as an annex to the Economic and Investment Plan for the region. We are concerned that **short-term economic investments will prevail over the long-term sustainability** with some investments running counter to the objectives of the European Green Deal. For instance, investments in gas infrastructure in a region that has traditionally been using very little gas create lock-ins into fossil-based technologies for decades rather than ensuring a rapid transition to a carbon-neutral economy. Investments in hydropower have been highly controversial across the region due to their significant impact on biodiversity and have met with resistance from local communities. Hydropower plants, as a recent study from Kosovo has shown again, have led to social conflict and protest and to conflict of interest in political decision-making. They have resulted in economic damage, e.g. linked to irrigation, drinking water supply, tourism and agricultural land degradation, and to environmental damage through the destruction of natural habitats, soil erosion, damage to forests and nature, the drying up of rivers, and water pollution.ⁱⁱ

Thirdly, we remind the EU and the governments in the Western Balkans that all investments in new infrastructure **must respect environmental rights in line with the Aarhus Convention**: access to information, public participation and access to justice in governmental decision-making processes on matters concerning the local, national and transboundary environment. Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) and Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs) must under all circumstances comply with the EU's requirements. In particular, vulnerable or marginalized groups must be consulted and their concerns and challenges need to be meaningfully addressed. All investments must be aligned with the EU's environmental objectives, must reduce inequalities and avoid environmental conflicts.

Fourth, the region has displayed a weak record in applying the EU's environmental acquis and state aid legislation, even under binding instruments such as the Energy Community Treaty.

We therefore underline that the Green Agenda in its current format **lacks sufficient emphasis on legal enforcement that could ensure its integrity**. Using the agenda as a guide for prioritisation for the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) III funding is welcome but does not ensure that the economy-wide application of EU environmental law will improve. We call for greater consideration of how existing instruments such as the Energy Community Treaty and Transport Community Treaty can be used to ensure the effective implementation of the Green Agenda.

Finally, we call on the EU to **allocate more funding to support environmental CSOs in the region** next to large-scale economic investment to make sure that environmental organisations can play an active role in awareness raising, providing information-based advocacy and as a watchdog. We are ready to bring our expertise to the table to ensure that the Green Agenda and the Investment Plan serve the objectives of the European Green Deal.

We are happy to engage in the discussion with you on how to ensure the Green Agenda will contribute to creating a sustainable future for the region.

Supporting organisations:

4x4x4 Balkan Bridges Skopje, North Macedonia
ALHem, Serbia
ATRC, Kosovo
CEE Bankwatch
CEKOR, Serbia
Centar za ekologiju i energiju, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Center for Environmental Research and Information Eko-svest, North Macedonia
Co-Plan, Albania
EDEN, Albania
Ekotim, Bosnia and Herzegovina
env.net
Environmental Ambassadors for Sustainable Development, Serbia
Environmental Engineering Group, Serbia
European Environmental Bureau (EEB)
Fundazione punto.sud, Italy
Green Home, Montenegro
GO GREEN, North Macedonia
Institute for Environmental Policy, Albania
LIR Evolution, Bosnia and Herzegovina
NGO Eco-team, Montenegro
Sredina, Serbia
WECF, the Netherlands
WWF Adria
YEE

ⁱ Kosovo is under the “United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) established pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1244 of June 1999.” In this statement it is referred to as “Kosovo”.

ⁱⁱ Balkan Green Foundation / Institute for Development Policy (2019) *Hydropower Plants in Kosovo – The problems and their real potential*.