

We, EPP regional and local leaders and community representatives,

1. celebrate the successes achieved in ten years of Croatian membership of the EU, which serve as clear evidence of the benefits enlargement brings not only to the country in question, but also to the EU as a whole, by safeguarding democratic values and the rule of law, promoting closer political and economic cooperation and helping to preserve our European way of life. We are proud that EU membership has generated new opportunities for Croatian citizens and we recognise the exceptional contribution that Croatia makes to the shaping of EU policies and initiatives;
2. are particularly proud of the leadership and political vision of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), a cornerstone of the European People's Party family. Thanks to the courage and determination of HDZ, Croatia has made significant progress in areas including internal reforms – contributing to the autonomy of the local and regional levels of government, as well as the development of a competitive economy and modern, innovative infrastructure. During its ten years of EU membership, Croatia has firmly embraced European values and stands today as a beacon of democracy, growth and improvement;
3. emphasise how the Operational Programme Competitiveness and Cohesion, co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund, has contributed to the development of key sectors which are crucial for the well-being of all Croatian citizens, with a particular focus on the development of SMEs, environmental protection, transport and research and innovation. Investments have also been successfully channelled into sustainable urban development, the preservation and restoration of cultural heritage sites and the enhancement of tourist infrastructure. These initiatives boost regional development while preserving local economies, thereby protecting Croatia's extraordinary cultural and natural heritage;
4. reiterate that economic, social and territorial cohesion must remain a fundamental objective and guiding principle of our European Union, in order to ensure that Croatia's substantial progress is replicated throughout all Member States. Promoting cohesion fosters a sense of solidarity and mutual support among Member States, which is critical to maintaining peace, stability and security in Europe; it also helps addressing demographic challenges that are reshaping European regions and that risk undermining the EU's and its regions' competitiveness if left unaddressed. It is an unquestionably vital tool in ensuring unity across the continent, helping to prevent the intensification of existing structural vulnerabilities and newly emerging disparities that result from the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and the Russian invasion of Ukraine;



5. call for more legal guarantees to be set out in future programming periods to ensure greater decentralisation and the full involvement of local and regional authorities in the design, implementation and management of Cohesion Policy projects on the ground, in line with the principle of subsidiarity. This will ensure that the highest possible levels of impact and efficiency are achieved. The key principles of Cohesion Policy, such as its multi-level governance and partnership approach, must remain central to achieving a prosperous European Union where mutual support affords every citizen the opportunity to develop their full potential;
  
  6. call for a renewed commitment to enlargement, particularly in areas such as the Western Balkans, in order to secure stability in the region, the well-being and prospects of all citizens in these candidate countries, and to reverse the worrying trend of increasing citizens' mistrust towards the EU resulting from the lack of concrete progress on the issue of EU accession. Cross-border cooperation with neighbouring countries should also be strengthened, as this helps to meet the cohesion, neighbourhood and enlargement objectives in a cross-cutting way. The success story of the EU enlargement to Croatia included a full involvement of local and regional authorities in the accession process, a path to be promoted also in the Western Balkans region. We must make certain that candidate countries remain firmly on a trajectory towards future EU membership – a vital condition for ensuring lasting security and stability on the European continent, in the face of persisting Russian aggression and interference from hostile foreign actors.
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