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THE EESC AND THE CHALLENGES FACING THE SINGLE MARKET

The European Single Market faces ongoing challenges due to fragmentation, unfair commercial practices and the rapid pace of technological change. In a series of recent Opinions, the EESC (European Economic and Social Committee) has called on the European Union to take more decisive action to modernise the rules governing the Single Market, from product standards and market surveillance to territorial supply restrictions that distort competition across the Union. Regarding the latter, an Opinion (INT/1124) was adopted at the April Plenary Session, highlighting how territorial supply restrictions (TSCs) harm cross-border businesses and undermine the Single Market's promise to offer consumers choice and price competition. These restrictions are one of the ten main "terrible obstacles" to the Single Market identified by the European Commission in its Single Market Strategy. They are limitations imposed by multinational manufacturers to prevent retailers and wholesalers from sourcing goods wherever they wish within the European Single Market, costing European consumers around €14 billion



a year, with identical products sometimes sold at prices more than 100% higher in one Member State than in a neighbouring Country. Councillor Ulgiati stated «it is unsustainable to allow the Single Market to remain so fragmented, because it is European consumers who end up paying the price. Furthermore, against a backdrop of geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainty, where inflation and the cost of living are rising and purchasing power is falling – he added – it is very important that consumers and workers can reap all the potential benefits of a better-functioning Single Market in terms of prices and product choice. Social partners and consumers – Ulgiati concluded – are increasingly having to deal with the impact of the cost-of-living crisis in their regions, a situation which, in turn, undermines the economic and social cohesion of our societies». The EESC therefore urges Member States to remove unjustified barriers to the free movement of goods, such as certain labelling rules, without undermining legitimate consumer protection requirements.

EU-BALKANS SUMMIT ON ENLARGEMENT

Against a backdrop of growing geopolitical tensions, the Summit between Brussels and the Western Balkans has just concluded in Tivat, a former Yugoslav naval base and now a Montenegrin gem among the Adriatic's most exclusive destinations. On the agenda was the issue of EU enlargement to include six candidate or prospective Member States: Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo. For Brussels, enlargement to the Western Balkans is not merely an opportunity, but a "geostrategic necessity" for Europe, representing a strategic investment in the security and stability of the Old Continent's eastern flank, given that energy, security and migration routes pass through these regions. Italy has long been among the main promoters of the integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union, working to ensure that the Countries in the region are guaranteed a concrete and credible prospect of accession. The journey began way back in 2003 at the Thessaloniki Summit, and since then progress has been



made, particularly by certain Countries, such as Montenegro, which remains the most advanced Nation on the path to accession, with the stated aim of becoming the 28th Member State by 2028, followed by Albania, a Country that is making the most rapid progress in aligning with the EU acquis. Serbia, which has been negotiating accession since 2014, continues, however, to face a series of political obstacles relating in particular to alignment with EU foreign policy, whilst North Macedonia continues to suffer the consequences of bilateral disputes with Greece and Bulgaria. Bringing up the rear are Bosnia and Herzegovina, which still lags behind on the rule of law and economic reforms, and Kosovo, the candidate furthest from accession. In the background is Ukraine's accession, on which everyone agrees in principle, but which instead sparks heated debates regarding the timing and methods for achieving it.