



European Economic and Social Committee

7th WESTERN BALKANS CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM

Tirana, 16-17 April 2019

FINAL DECLARATION

1. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), representing the economic and social components of organised civil society in the European Union (EU), held its seventh Western Balkans Civil Society Forum with the support of the European Commission and the Regional Cooperation Council. The forum brought together representatives of Western Balkans trade unions, employers and civil society organisations, EESC members, representatives of the governments of the Western Balkans, and EU and international institutions.
2. The following major themes were discussed at the Forum: assessment of and prospects for relations between the EU and the Western Balkans; the role of the social partners and civil society organisations in promoting regional cooperation (in trade and investment, connectivity and people-to-people relations); and the state of social dialogue and of enabling civic space in the Western Balkans.

The forum participants adopted the following declaration:

On the assessment of and prospects for relations between the EU and the Western Balkans:

The participants:

3. welcome the progress made by most of the partners in the region towards EU accession since the last Forum, which took place in Sarajevo in July 2017: Montenegro and Serbia have opened a number of new chapters, albeit at a slower pace than expected; Albania and North Macedonia have continued with the reforms needed in order to start EU accession negotiations, hopefully later this year; Bosnia and Herzegovina is moving forward towards obtaining EU candidate status; and Kosovo^{*} has undertaken reforms that allowed the European Commission to issue a positive opinion on visa liberalisation for Kosovo citizens;
4. express satisfaction that the long-standing name issue has finally been solved between Greece and North Macedonia; now that this issue is no longer hindering North Macedonia's path towards EU integration, ask the Council to validate this significant effort and follow up on the

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

European Commission's recommendation to open accession negotiations as soon as the necessary conditions are fulfilled;

5. fully support intra-regional cooperation in the Western Balkans; at the same time stress the importance of individual merit in the enlargement process, where each candidate for EU membership is judged according to its own results;
6. welcome the Commission's new strategy for the Western Balkans entitled "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans", and its six flagship initiatives; urge all EU institutions to contribute to the implementation of the actions stipulated in the Action Plan in Support of the Transformation of the Western Balkans for 2018-2020;
7. note that the Strategy clearly states that all countries wanting to join the EU need to resolve their bilateral disputes beforehand, and express the hope that solutions will soon be found to all such pending disputes; point out that there are ongoing protests in a number of Western Balkan countries and in that regard stress the importance of effective dialogue within functional democratic institutions, as well as the importance of the right and freedom of citizens to express themselves;
8. are convinced that the enlargement of the EU, and in particular the spread of its democratic values and legal standards to the Western Balkans, is in the interest of both the region and the EU; express the hope that enlargement will remain one of the EU's priorities, despite the multitude of challenges it is currently facing; call on the new European Parliament and the new European Commission to continue to be supportive of EU enlargement policy after the European elections in May 2019 and to improve their toolbox for engagement with the Western Balkans;
9. welcome the Sofia Declaration of the EU-Western Balkans Summit of 17 May 2018 and its Priority Agenda and encourage future presidencies of the Council of the EU to keep the integration of the Western Balkan countries high on their list of priorities; invite EU institutions and EU Member States to regularly involve representatives from the countries of the Western Balkans in EU summits, starting from the Sibiu European Council to be held next month, as proof that the EU considers this region to be part of its future;
10. express concern about the shrinking space for civil society in a number of countries in the Western Balkans; encourage the authorities in the Western Balkans to redouble their efforts to ensure respect for the rule of law, fundamental rights, judicial reform, the fight against corruption and the independence of journalists and freedom of the press – some of the core European values that every EU Member State should respect;
11. once again stress the need for an EU enlargement policy that focuses on democratisation, the rule of law, intra-regional cooperation and the building of trust, as well as a more structured and systematic approach in terms of civil society participation; invite the EU to consider and support, alongside its top-down strategies, civil society's bottom-up strategies for promoting the rule of law;

12. welcome the European Commission's proposal to increase the funds allocated to the new Programme for Pre-accession Assistance for 2021-2027 (IPA III) and invite all EU institutions to support this increase; believe that a substantial increase in pre-accession assistance would enable partners from the Western Balkans to be better prepared for accession, meet the *acquis* standards and improve economic and social convergence with the EU; consider it extremely important to strengthen social and civil dialogue in the Western Balkans and encourage the Commission to further facilitate the access of independent social partners and civil society organisations, as well as associations of investigative journalism - key democratic actors true to European values in the region - to IPA funds;
13. welcome the positive effect the Berlin process has had on the Western Balkans, building on the EU enlargement process, and express high expectations for the sixth Western Balkans Summit that will take place in Poznań on 4 and 5 July; express the hope that the social partners and civil society organisations will be invited to contribute to the Summit.

On the role of civil society organisations in promoting regional cooperation:

The participants, in the area of *trade and investment*:

14. stress that the Central European Free Trade Agreement and Regional Economic Area (REA) have great potential to increase intra-regional trade and economic growth, to the benefit of all the citizens of the Western Balkans; point out that political stability and good neighbourly relations are fundamental prerequisites for economic growth; stress that a common regional market would bring new jobs, lower costs, a faster flow of goods and people and more investors to the Western Balkans;
15. stress that all unjustified tariffs imposed on imports of goods and services between the CEFTA parties should be lifted; likewise point out that Western Balkans authorities need to address all major obstacles, including bilateral disputes and free movement of citizens, to achieve further progress in regional economic integration and trade and to attract foreign investment;
16. emphasise the importance of properly implementing the CEFTA agreement and REA, as well as reducing regional trade tensions between the parties; with regard to trade, stress that the Western Balkans need to establish regional mutual recognition mechanisms in relevant areas in order to reduce non-tariff barriers and streamline border crossings;
17. point out that, in order to attract private investment, the authorities of the Western Balkans need to make sure that firms can enter, compete on equal terms on and exit the market; stress that in order to create new jobs it is important to have a favourable and more predictable business environment, but also to develop adequate support to foster labour market integration of vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, young people, women and minorities;
18. invite the European Commission to further facilitate learning and development through the exchange of best practice at regional level; priority should be given to building the capacity of

relevant stakeholders, facilitating access to the market and finance and providing business advisory services;

19. recall that social and civil dialogue is key to the economic and social development of the Western Balkans and the EU; call for better transparency and earlier and greater involvement of the social partners and civil society organisations in large regional projects, as a precondition for successful implementation of the REA; welcome the establishment of Chamber Investment Forum of the Western Balkans;
20. encourage authorities in the Western Balkans to invest significantly in quality education, from early childhood development all the way to technical and university education, in order to enable a smooth transition from school to work and to promote entrepreneurship; point out that lifelong learning and vocational education and training are of crucial importance for a functional economy that can cope with the challenges of digitalisation;
21. stress that strengthening the rule of law and fighting corruption is crucial in improving the business and investment climate across the region, with strong and independent institutions, enforcement of legislation, reduction of the informal economy and modernisation of public administrations being of particular importance;
22. express concern at the fact that only a limited number of businesses in the Western Balkans use internet and digital tools to increase their productivity and further their development; call for support for micro-enterprises and SMEs to help them to develop and implement their IT projects and gear activities and programmes better to their needs;
23. stress that the EU is the largest trading partner and biggest investor in the Western Balkans and therefore that it is in the EU's own economic interest to make the region more attractive for trade and investment, and to join up its transport, energy and digital networks.

The participants, in the area of *connectivity*:

24. strongly support the "Connectivity Agenda" of the Western Balkans to extend the trans-European transport and energy networks/corridors to the region, with the help of funds from the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance and international financial institutions;
25. stress the need for Western Balkans authorities to accelerate project preparation and project implementation in the areas of transport and energy, which are often hampered by weak public administration capacity in the Western Balkans and by poor regional coordination between these public administrations; point to the need for better involvement by local communities and the social partners and civil society organisations in these infrastructure projects;
26. call for national beneficiaries in the Western Balkans to be involved in regional connectivity projects from the earliest stages; ask for a performance tracking system to be established at regional level, accompanied by related mechanisms that can identify and address concerns at bilateral or regional level at an early stage;

27. stress that Western Balkans authorities need to proceed with the adoption of key EU energy legislation within the framework of the Energy Community Treaty and continue their efforts to create a regional electricity market;
28. call for the governments of the Western Balkans to pave the way for clean energy transition by adopting targets for 2030 with regard to renewable energy, energy efficiency and greenhouse gas emission reduction in line with the EU's targets for 2030, taking into account the socio-economic context and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and to ensure the involvement of the social partners and civil society organisations in this process;
29. call for the phasing out of inefficient coal subsidies that encourage wasteful electricity consumption and distort the energy markets; support the idea of establishing a dedicated private investment fund for modern renewable energy in the Western Balkans, reforestation and the eradication of energy poverty in the region;
30. welcome the establishment of the Transport Community and express the hope that it will soon become fully operational; stress the importance of the inclusion of the social partners and civil society organisations in the activities of the Transport Community;
31. stress that the authorities of the Western Balkans should collect, publish and regularly update statistical data, in line with EU standards, in order to allow for continuous monitoring by the social partners and civil society organisations; encourage political authorities to involve the social partners and civil society organisations in the design of transport and energy policies;
32. stress that the benefits of connectivity derive not only from opening up to greater trading opportunities, but also from knowledge transfers between countries; point out the need for mutual recognition of academic qualifications;
33. welcome the launching of the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans, which calls for investment in broadband connectivity, increasing cybersecurity and strengthening the digital economy and society, as well as for gradual reduction of roaming charges, for the benefit of citizens and companies; welcomes the recent signing of the all-inclusive regional roaming agreement which will eliminate roaming costs as of 2021;
34. stress that citizens and companies are the real drivers of digital development and recommend that – in order to be able to fully exploit the potential of digitalisation as a tool for economic growth and social development – Western Balkans governments step up their efforts in the area of digital education and training; call on Western Balkans authorities to invest more in modernisation and digitalisation of schools and to enable high speed internet in all primary and secondary schools;
35. believe that skills mismatches in the Western Balkans, as well as challenges in the labour market generated by digital and technological changes in the economy, can be addressed by the development of more effective vocational training and apprenticeship and lifelong learning schemes, and with closer involvement by the social partners and relevant civil society organisations in their design.

The participants, in the area of *people-to-people relations – building bridges*:

36. welcome the resolution of the decades-long dispute between Greece and North Macedonia over the name of the latter and encourage both countries to fully implement the Prespa Agreement; emphasise the important role that the social partners and civil society organisations from both countries will play in the implementation phase in order to build bridges between the two societies and to reduce scepticism among citizens about the outcome of the Agreement reached at the highest political level;
37. note that the Western Balkans continue to be reluctant about regional cooperation due to long-lasting conflicts; stress the need for the region to overcome the legacy of the past and foster mutual trust and to create a climate conducive to solving outstanding bilateral issues; point out that regional initiatives should ideally be regionally owned and implemented by the Western Balkans themselves, with the EU being only a facilitator in their implementation;
38. stress that, in order to continue developing a bottom-up approach, support should be given to projects by grassroots and local initiatives focused on promoting good neighbourly relations and addressing common problems in Western Balkans societies; in order to facilitate reconciliation, propose increasing financial support to regional projects focused in particular on exchanges of experiences between citizens through mobility and travel;
39. emphasise the important role played by the media in conflict prevention and resolution, and underline that public broadcasters should lead the way in promoting tolerance, understanding and mutual respect and in constructively contributing to peace in society;
40. emphasise the specificity of the Western Balkans region in terms of depopulation as a result of intra-regional migration and emigration, especially of young people, towards the EU, which has a significant impact on the demographics and societies of these countries and thus on their socio-economic landscape and outlook;
41. stress the need for governments to invest much more in young people and to develop policies in close cooperation with the social partners and civil society organisations representing youth; point out that improving education, reducing youth unemployment and achieving better inclusion of young people into the societies of the Western Balkans is the only way to mitigate their migration tendencies; encourage regional exchange projects between young people;
42. stress the need for all stakeholders to further promote and enhance the role of women and girls, female entrepreneurship, women-oriented NGOs and think tanks as agents of change for the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies, including conflict prevention, mediation, peacebuilding and conflict recovery.

On the state of social dialogue in the Western Balkans:

The participants:

43. stress the important role that national tripartite bodies should play in shaping and monitoring the Economic Reform Programme (ERP) and the Employment and Social Reform Programme (ESRP), and invite the Western Balkans authorities to regularly involve and consult those bodies in the process of adopting these important documents and all the reforms stemming from them;
44. stress the importance of collective bargaining as a key mechanism for creating a fair and sustainable wage system and combating the gender pay gap, as well as vertical and sectoral segregation on the labour market; call on the Western Balkans governments to guarantee the right of freedom of association, both in law and in practice, and to ensure an environment that will stimulate the development of collective bargaining, including at sectoral level;
45. stress the importance of the traditional concept of labour relations and of social dialogue, and invite the Western Balkans authorities, including at local level, to increase cooperation with the social partners operating in the area of social policy, employment and economic policies; emphasise that the social partners should be consulted, more systematically and in a timely matter, on all relevant legislative proposals and at all stages when developing strategic documents;
46. once again invite the EU institutions and the Western Balkans governments to provide for the strengthening of the overall capacities of the social partners, while at the same time fully preserving their independence;
47. call for the governments to comply with and guarantee compliance with labour laws, and to improve tripartite social dialogue;
48. highlight the role of the social partners in digital transformation and call on the Western Balkans authorities to include them in a better and more effective way, including through collective labour agreements, in the policy-making process; stress that social dialogue will be of crucial importance in the efforts to alleviate the effects of the digital revolution on the future of work and labour relations;
49. encourage social partners from the countries of the Western Balkans to also deepen their relations at regional level (networking activities and sharing of experiences);
50. in connection with the ILO's 100th anniversary, call on EU and Western Balkans authorities to support and ratify the new convention to be adopted during the 108th International Labour Conference in June 2019: "Ending violence and harassment against women and men in the world of work".

On the state of civil dialogue and enabling civic space in the Western Balkans:

The participants:

51. ask that, in addition to proper tripartite social dialogue, the Western Balkans governments consider establishing functioning civil society dialogue mechanisms that involve both the social partners and civil society organisations, along the lines of the European Economic and Social Committee;
52. remind the Western Balkans authorities of the importance of guaranteeing freedom of association and ensuring an enabling civic space for a strong and effective civil dialogue; invite all Western Balkans governments to adopt national strategies for an enabling environment for the social partners and civil society organisations and their accompanying action plans;
53. emphasise that freedom of expression and free media are prerequisites for establishing solid democracies and allowing a vibrant civil society to develop; stress that civil society must be vocal and take the lead in denouncing the negative developments in the region in relation to freedom of expression, such as political pressure on the media; stress the importance of investigative journalism in fighting corruption;
54. stress that the social partners and civil society organisations, as well as independent regulatory bodies, are an important partner for the government and play an essential democratic role; their meaningful and systematic participation in working groups on drafting laws, strategies and action plans should be ensured, with the obligation to report on the results of consultation processes;
55. remind the Western Balkans authorities that the European Commission's Guidance for the Economic Reform Programmes notes that the involvement of civil society organisations in reporting on and monitoring programme implementation is crucial to creating ownership and the broadest possible political support;
56. stress the importance of stepping up cooperation with civil society organisations operating in the area of social policies, including systematic consultation at all stages of the legislative proposals;
57. condemn the attacks on the social partners and civil society organisations by government representatives and government-funded media; invite the Western Balkans authorities to guarantee the protection of human rights defenders, anti-corruption organisations and independent journalists and to prosecute and bring to justice perpetrators and those that have ordered attacks on the social partners and civil society organisations; call for the adoption and implementation of laws on whistle-blowing and for steps to make the system of whistle-blower protection more effective in practice;
58. call for the Western Balkans authorities to enable free access to information for their citizens, without unnecessary restrictions;

59. following the example of the "Priebe Report" for North Macedonia, call on the EU institutions to monitor reforms in the area of the rule of law in the EU candidate countries more effectively, by commissioning independent analyses of mechanisms that endanger democracy and lead to public institutions being captured for political purposes; are pleased that the first such analysis on the rule of law has just been launched, relating to Bosnia and Herzegovina;
60. stress the need for improvement in terms of strengthening mechanisms for cooperation with civil society in EU integration processes;
61. stress the need for the social partners and civil society organisations to proactively establish and strengthen issue-based and/or sectoral civic networks as the best way to boost their impact towards beneficiaries, but also as an effective way to mitigate pressure or intimidation from political interference; point out that the social partners and civil society organisations should strengthen their capacity and legitimacy by investing more in increasing their membership (for membership-based social partners and civil society organisations), as well as communication capacities with their constituency and the public at large;
62. emphasise the importance of regional cooperation between civic networks in order to exchange best practices in their specific areas of expertise; stress that civil society organisations from the Western Balkans should be regularly invited to participate in debates at EU level;
63. call on the Western Balkans authorities and EU institutions to strengthen the capacities of associations of liberal professions in the Western Balkans; highlight the important role of chambers of liberal professions in implementing the rule of law and in fighting corruption; highlight the important role of associations of journalists in respecting the freedom of media.

The participants:

64. invite all relevant stakeholders to implement recommendations from final declarations of previous EESC's Western Balkans Civil Society Forums issued for areas such as fight against corruption, freedom of expression and media, youth employment, rights and empowerment of women, sustainable growth and employment, migration and minority rights in the Western Balkans.
 65. request that the EESC transmit this final declaration to the governments of the region, the European institutions, the Regional Cooperation Council, the International Labour Organisation, the Council of Europe and the Polish Presidency of the Western Balkans Summit in Poznań.
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