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## The EESC's 7th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum

Tirana (Albania), 16-17.04.2019



The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is the EU institution which works as the voice of organised civil society in Europe. Apart from representing and fostering the interests of civil society in the EU, it is also actively involved in promoting relations with civil society in the candidate countries of the Western Balkans.

The Western Balkans Civil Society Forum is organised every two years and provides an opportunity to exchange views on the current situation of civil society in the region, its needs and its future development.

The topics of the 7th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum were: assessment and perspectives of the relations between the EU and the Western Balkans; regional cooperation – enhancing civil society participation (trade and investment, connectivity, chaired by Pierre-Jean Coulon, president of the EESC's TEN section, people to people relations – building bridges); the situation of civil society in the Western Balkans (the state of social dialogue in the Western Balkans, achieving and

enabling civic space).



In the area of connectivity, the participants stressed 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. Moreover, the participants welcomed 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.



Regarding the subject of social dialogue in the Western Balkans, the panel was chaired by Plamen Dimitrov, Vice-President of the EESC's Workers' Group. He introduced the following speakers:

Zhuljeta Harasani, ILO National Coordinator for Albania. Deploring the lack of trust between social partners in the Western Balkans, and the lack of transparency as regards who is responsible within governments for organising social dialogue, she opposed the idea that social dialogue would be an obstacle for the good functioning of the economy. Furthermore, she referred to the pressure put on countries for organising social dialogue as a requirement for membership to the European Union. Social platforms exist and function, but they too are in need for training. She also raised the question of creating ESAP II (Employment and Social Affairs Platform, EU-funded and implemented by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and the ILO, aimed at helping Western Balkan countries in developing their employment and social affairs policy in their pre-accession period, project which will end this year).

Duško Vuković, Vice-President of the Council of the Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions of Serbia (CATUS), contested the way in which, within the context of this Forum, the items of social dialogue and civic space were divided into two separate panels. Moreover, he deplored the lack of interest shown by the media in the subjects dealt with at this Forum. He criticised the working of economic and social councils (when they exist) and politics, which let themselves be influenced too much by the capital. The social partners must also get more involved in politics. He referred to the upcoming elections in Serbia, where labour legislation will not be an item at those elections.

Suzana Radulović, Secretary General of the Montenegrin Employers Federation, underlined that, even when there is a regulatory framework, this does not mean that it is also working. There is more obstruction than support from the national government. Confusion is created, when separate initiatives are taken by Parliament, with a very short consultation of the social partners. The proposal for increasing the minimum wage from 193 to 215 euro was rejected both by the employers and the government.

Edison Hoxha, Executive Director of the Centre for Labour Relations of Albania, underlined the need for transparency regarding the representativeness criteria and mentioned the lack of capacity shown by the trade unions. Moreover, he regretted the failure of meeting the labour norms as established by the ILO. A question that would later lead to a great discussion, was: how can we coordinate, promote the cooperation between trade unions and NGOs? Finally, he spoke about the fact that social dialogue is missing practically everywhere.

The panel chairman formulated the conclusions. There is a need for governments and public services to increase their involvement in making social dialogue work. The social partners' capacity needs to be reinforced. Trade unions need to acquire more expertise through training. Social dialogue is a matter strictly for the three social partners, NGOs fall under civil society.



Bert Van Caelenberg, secretary general of Eurofedop, attended the social dialogue session. As Eurofedop, we are of the view that, when the EESC sets up high-level conferences of this kind, the approach should be much more oriented towards the local situation. There is also a need for showing more diplomacy in dealing with the subject under study. Real progress can only be achieved if it starts from the basis. When trade unions have failed to adapt themselves in the last 40 years, in making a shift towards the sectoral approach, they are condemned to disappear.

The collective bargaining agreement, which our postal trade union from Albania (SPPSH, headed by Ylli Ballta) was able to sign with the postal company's direction on 16/04, in the presence of Eurofedop, is THÉ way to a real social dialogue.

Eurofedop was pleased to notice the presence at the 7th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum of our President Fritz Neugebauer and our member organisations from Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia and Albania.