



European Economic and Social Committee

6th WESTERN BALKANS CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM

Sarajevo, 10-11 July 2017

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)¹, held its sixth Western Balkans Civil Society Forum with the support of the European Commission. The forum brought together representatives of Western Balkans trade unions, employers and other civil society organisations (CSOs), EESC members, representatives of the governments of the Western Balkans, and EU and international institutions.
2. This year the forum was held in the symbolic city of Sarajevo, on the day of remembrance of the tragic events that happened twenty-two years ago in Srebrenica. A minute's silence was observed out of respect for the victims.
3. The following major themes were discussed at the forum: assessment of and perspectives on relations between the EU and the Western Balkans; the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in promoting sustainable growth and employment; migration; freedom of expression and media; and the rights and empowerment of women in the Western Balkans.

The forum participants adopted the following declaration:

On assessment of perspectives on the relations between the EU and the Western Balkans:

The participants:

4. welcome the progress made by most of the countries of the region towards EU accession since the last forum, which took place in Belgrade in June 2015: Montenegro and Serbia opened and provisionally closed a number of new chapters; Albania continued with the reforms needed in order to start EU accession negotiations later this year; Bosnia and Herzegovina continued to implement reforms that should eventually allow the country to obtain EU candidate status; and Kosovo started implementing the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA);
5. express satisfaction that the long-standing political crises in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia seem to have subsided and ask the Council to follow up on the European

¹ In accordance with the established terminology of the EESC, the concepts "civil society" and "civil society organisations" in this declaration include social partners (i.e. employers and trade unions) and any other non-state actors.

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

6. are convinced that a clear perspective on accession is essential for the stability of the region and express the hope that enlargement will remain one of the EU's priorities, despite the multitude of challenges it is currently facing;
7. express deep concern about the shrinking space for civil society in an increasing number of countries in the Western Balkans; note that the EU and its Member States committed themselves to promoting space for civil society and enhancing support for the building capacity of CSOs to strengthen their voice in the development process and to advance political, social and economic dialogue;
8. 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 and its Member States to adopt sharper and more coherent approaches and to take concrete actions to protect and expand civil society space and bring concrete benefits to the citizens of the Western Balkans countries;
9. express concern about the increasingly prominent role of external players in this geopolitically strategic region;
10. call for more financial means to be made available to reduce social hardships associated with the region's transformation;
11. invite EU institutions and EU Member States to regularly involve representatives from the countries of the Western Balkans in EU summits, as proof that the EU considers this region to be part of its future.

On the role of social partners and other CSOs in promoting sustainable growth and employment:

The participants:

12. are pleased that signs of economic recovery can be seen in most of the countries of the region; once again stress the need for the political authorities to focus more on addressing fundamental reforms early in the enlargement process, in close cooperation with the economic and social partners; stress the need for Western Balkan countries and the EU to ensure an effective use of EU programmes supporting competitiveness and promoting economic growth such as Horizon 2020 and COSME for SMEs;
13. welcome the economic and financial dialogue between the EU and the Western Balkan countries and call for greater involvement on the part of social partners and other CSOs in the elaboration of economic reform programmes (ERPs), as well as joint conclusions with specific recommendations for each country in the region;

14. invite the governments of the region to invest in complementary approaches to classical economic policies (circular economy, social economy, sustainable development goals (SDGs), mainstreaming) in order to boost overall growth and employment;
15. consider strengthening social and civil dialogue in the Western Balkan countries and encourage the Commission to further facilitate the access of social partners and other civil society organisations to the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA);
16. recall that social and civil dialogue is key to the economic and social development of the Western Balkans and the EU; call for the early involvement of social partners and other CSOs in the drafting of legislation and in regular consultations with economic and social councils as regards new legislative proposals;
17. encourage social partners from the countries of the Western Balkans to also deepen their relations at regional level;
18. call for the governments to comply with and guarantee compliance with labour laws, as well as improving tripartite social dialogue; emphasise that the effectiveness of dialogue has been weakened by poor economic performance and low growth, which has pushed the parties into defensive positions; stress that social cohesion requires employment-friendly economic policies and measures ensuring the sustainability of social protection networks.

On the role of civil society in migration in the Western Balkans:

The participants:

19. recognise the substantial efforts and resources that certain countries of the region have invested into addressing the refugee crises and into giving the necessary assistance and shelter to thousands of refugees passing through and/or remaining on their territory, in accordance with the Geneva Convention;
20. stress that countries of the Western Balkans need to adopt legislation, both on asylum and on migration, that will enable a sustainable asylum system and efficient procedures for registration, protection, integration and readmission of migrants;
21. appreciate the important role civil society is playing in the refugee crisis, especially when it comes to providing humanitarian assistance and psycho-social support; stress that cooperation and coordination among CSOs and with governments could be further improved;
22. emphasise the importance of regional cooperation between CSOs specialising in migrants and refugees in order to exchange best practices in their specific areas of expertise and to combat xenophobia; stress that CSOs from the Western Balkans should be invited to participate in debates on refugees and migration held at EU level;
23. encourage political authorities to involve CSOs, including social partners, in the design of sustainable long-term integration policies, covering skills screening and recognition, education

and training, including civic education, language courses and access to the labour market, to be applied as soon as possible if a positive outcome of the asylum procedure is to be expected;

24. stress that governments should develop information strategies targeting young people in particular, which would provide them with information about EU migration policy and the consequences of irregular migration; emphasise the need for governments to establish cooperation agreements with EU Member States regarding seasonal employment opportunities, as well as investing more in post-secondary professional education and training programmes, especially for young people;
25. 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 demography and society of these countries and thus on their socio-economic landscape and perspectives;
26. stress in particular the significance of rural depopulation in the countries of the Western Balkans where more and more people are moving to cities in order to find employment and benefit from more adequate health and education facilities; emphasise that governments should prioritize the development of rural areas and the creation of employment opportunities, especially for young people living in these areas;
27. emphasise the need for better collection of relevant statistical data related to migration in order to improve monitoring and evaluation in this area;
28. call on the Commission to simplify access to the Instrument for Pre-accession in Rural Development (IPARD) which remains the main source of financial assistance for rural areas in the Western Balkans.

On the freedom of expression and media in the Western Balkans:

The participants:

29. 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;
30. warn that direct and indirect pressure is exerted on the media, including increasing attacks, smear campaigns, vilification of investigative media, hate crimes and defamation suits against journalists; stress that governments should condemn and act upon any violent attacks;
31. emphasise that the independence of public service broadcasters (PBSs) should be strengthened and non-transparent financial dependencies and ownership of media outlets, the overwhelming share of state aid and/or state advertising in media funding, and its arbitrary distribution, should be stopped;

32. emphasise the important role the media plays 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;
33. stress the important role investigative journalism plays in the fight against corruption;
34. consider that all journalists and editors, as well as media owners, should respect existing domestic and international standards and journalism codes of conduct;
35. emphasise that poor social protection and working conditions of journalists represent a direct form of pressure that fuels the spread of self-censorship, hinders independent, quality journalism and favours "tabloidization" instead; insist that journalists' unions and labour laws are crucial for alleviating these issues; call on the authorities and EU institutions to strengthen the capacities of associations and trade unions of professional journalists, as well as self-regulatory bodies;
36. stress that ombudsmen can make a decisive contribution by working on fundamental rights, including freedom of expression and the media;
37. once more ask the Commission to provide for a substantial increase in financial support, including from projects under the Civil Society Facility supporting professionalism and independence of the media, as well as networking activities.

On the rights and empowerment of women in the EU and in the Western Balkans:

The participants:

38. stress the common challenges that the EU and the Western Balkans are facing regarding gender inequality: widespread domestic violence, limited labour market opportunities, harassment and violence in the workplace, salary and pension gaps between women and men, reproductive and maternity rights and unequal access to participation in high-level politics (despite existing targeted objectives);
39. emphasise that labour market trends in the region reveal high inactivity rates among women; urge the governments to provide support to ensure higher employment levels for women are achieved during the enlargement process;
40. call for governments to pursue stricter monitoring, more consistent implementation of existing gender equality legislation and public awareness-raising campaigns; stress the importance of establishing sustainable funding mechanisms for addressing and combating gender inequalities in practice; stress that CSOs working on the promotion and protection of women's rights should be recognised as important partners in conducting comprehensive and systematic reforms aimed at achieving gender equality in practice;
41. stress the need for all actors to further promote and enhance the role of women and girls as agents of change for the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies, including conflict prevention, mediation, peacebuilding and conflict recovery;

42. stress the importance of gender balance in decision-making bodies and company boards, as well as the need to increase the level of female entrepreneurship;
43. emphasise the importance of adequate statistical data collection, evaluation and accountability, as well as the need to analyse all funding from a gender perspective;
44. stress that violence against women is typically not recognised as such: there is often a lack of prosecution and proper sentencing of perpetrators as well as feeble support for victims; emphasise that the institutions that should offer protection often lack understanding or are unresponsive and free legal aid is not always available;
45. emphasise that awareness needs to be raised, prevention against violence enhanced and the Istanbul Convention, one of the goals of which is ensuring enough specialised support services, including shelters and helplines for survivors, needs to be implemented, particularly with regard to the financing of CSO-run safe houses;
46. encourage the Commission to include gender equality among the top priorities in the EU accession negotiations with the countries of the Western Balkans;
47. stress the need to increase awareness through the media, public campaigns and education programmes to eliminate gender stereotypes and promote women's active participation in all paths of life; emphasise that the language of job vacancies should be gender neutral.

The participants:

48. 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, and the Council of Europe.
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