



European Economic and Social Committee

4th WESTERN BALKANS CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM

Zagreb, 26-27 November 2012

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), has held its fourth Western Balkans Civil Society Forum with the support of the European Commission. It has brought together 150 participants, including representatives of Western Balkans civil society organisations (CSOs), EESC members, European and international socio-professional organisations, European NGOs, representatives of the governments of the Western Balkans, diplomats, EU institutions and international organisations.
2. The following major themes were discussed at the Forum: EU-Western Balkans relations and the reform progress in the region; the need to protect freedom of expression and freedom of the media; the involvement of civil society organisations in the enlargement process; and rural development and employment.

The Forum participants have adopted the following declaration:

On relations between the Western Balkan countries and the EU:

The participants:

3. welcome the progress made by the countries of the region towards EU accession since the last Forum organised in 2010; welcome in particular the upcoming accession of Croatia to the EU and support the view that this achievement will encourage the other countries in the region to follow the same path of engagement and reforms in the upcoming period.
4. ask the Council to follow-up the recommendation of the European Commission made for the fourth year in a row to open accession negotiations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.
5. are pleased that Montenegro and Serbia made decisive steps towards EU accession this year, with the opening of accession negotiations for Montenegro and access to the status of candidate country for Serbia.
6. urge the political authorities of potential candidate countries to make the needed reforms, and ask the European Commission to assist them, in order for those countries to make progress

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towards EU accession; highlight that the threat of having a gap widening between candidate and potential candidate countries must be avoided.

7. praise the recent lifting of the visa regime for citizens of the Western Balkans travelling to Schengen countries and encourage the dialogue launched between Prishtina and Brussels to achieve the same results as soon as possible; stress that lifting the visa regime brings the EU closer to the citizens of the enlargement countries in a very tangible and positive manner.
8. disapprove the practice of some citizens of the Western Balkans to misuse the lifting of visa restrictions to apply for the status of asylum seekers once they are in the EU Member States; highlight that eligibility criteria are very strict and that this move could have serious negative consequences for the visa regime itself.
9. welcome the new method adopted at EU level of beginning by opening Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security) in any upcoming accession negotiations with candidate countries; stress that this will help the negotiating countries to make necessary and sustainable efforts to fight against corruption and organised crime and to improve the functioning of the judiciary.
10. call on the EU institutions to take the necessary steps towards full membership of GRECO – the Council of Europe Group of states against corruption - which would reinforce EU expertise on corruption and allow the EC to issue more detailed recommendations to tackle the phenomenon in each country.

On the reform progress in the region:

11. are pleased that important steps have been taken by the governments of the Western Balkans to enhance regional cooperation and improve bilateral relations; stress that efforts to improve regional cooperation are a legitimate parameter for the EU institutions to assess the progress of individual countries.
12. encourage the Regional Cooperation Council to pursue further projects of regional interest, especially in the field of economic and social development and justice and home affairs, to the benefit of all citizens in the region; welcome in particular the adoption of the South East Europe 2020 Strategy and encourage all relevant stakeholders in the Western Balkan region, as well as EESC members, to work towards the implementation of this Strategy in the coming years.
13. share their concern over the gloomy economic situation in the region, with recession affecting many countries, inflationary pressures and very high unemployment rates; call on the political authorities to set up incentives that would decrease the share of the informal economy in overall output; stress the need to improve the business environment and to attract more foreign direct investment (FDI); stress that on all these difficult issues, the political authorities

must work towards the necessary reforms in close cooperation with the economic and social partners.

14. consider that more government funding must be allocated to encourage active employment policies; also urge that efforts be focused in particular on the low employment rates of women and young people and on strengthening employment agencies; call on the EC to accelerate the integration of the Western Balkans public employment agencies in EURES – the Network of European Employment Services.
15. support the conclusions of the European Commission (EC) progress reports released in October 2012, describing the progress achieved in each country of the region; highlight, however, that a more in-depth assessment of the progress achieved in the social and civil dialogues must be carried out for each country.
16. ask the EC to involve the EESC in its consultations with civil society organisations from the Western Balkans when drafting the progress reports.
17. stress that one of the key steps the Western Balkan countries can take to ease the process of acceding to the EU is to pursue the reforms of their public administrations; stress that recruitments based on professional qualifications must be enforced and that independent regulatory bodies must be set-up and strengthened.
18. highlight that another key area for reforms must be the strengthening of the judiciary and that significant efforts are still needed to reinforce the independence, impartiality and professionalism of the judicial system; stress that a solid public administration and impartial and efficient justice are the pillars of the rule of law.
19. call on the political authorities and the judiciary in the Western Balkan countries to improve their track record when it comes to handling high-level corruption cases in the near future; stress that focusing efforts on better supervision of public procurement procedures and on improving the legal framework for the financing of political parties could already bring some important improvements; call on the political authorities to work hand in hand with civil society organisations when introducing reforms and implementing legislation on these key issues.

On freedom of expression and freedom of the media:

The participants:

20. emphasise that freedom of expression and free media are prerequisites for establishing solid democracies and allowing for a vibrant civil society to develop.

21. deplore that serious reversals in terms of freedom of expression have taken place in recent years in most of the Western Balkan countries; recall that these issues will continue to be given prominence by the EU institutions in the accession process and ask the EU to give even more weight to freedom of the media as a benchmark when assessing the countries' progress.
22. stress that civil society must be vocal and take the lead in denouncing the recent negative developments in the region in relation to these issues; encourage journalists, their trade unions, and civil society organisations fighting for media freedom to reinforce their cooperation, including at regional level, in order to join forces.
23. condemn the governments of the region for the widespread political pressure exerted on media outlets, particularly public ones; denounce in particular the way in which government advertising campaigns are conducted in the media and ask for urgent actions that would bring transparency to these campaigns; also deplore that in some countries of the region political interference is strengthening the polarisation of the media sphere along ethnic lines.
24. draw attention to the fact that undue political pressures, added to the concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few businessmen, are encouraging self censorship among journalists, thus damaging the quality, independence and professionalism of their work; they further stress that the region lacks the right conditions for investigative journalism to report on sensitive issues such as corruption.
25. denounce the lack of normal labour contracts in many media outlets in the region which jeopardises the independence of journalists and call on the governments of the region to reinforce labour inspectorates in the media sector.
26. ask the EC to provide stronger support to journalists' trade unions and independent media associations defending freedom of expression; encourage the funding of projects under the Civil Society Facility with the aim of strengthening partnerships between European and Western Balkan organisations working on media freedom and freedom of expression.
27. stress that EU funds should support training and exchange programmes for journalists, networking and dissemination of best practices, the setting-up of journalists' associations and trade unions, and measures to encourage the work of young journalists; highlight the need for EU funds to also support solidarity actions between NGOs and media outlets aiming at publishing online information materials.
28. commend the South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO) for their work to support media freedom and provide training opportunities for leading journalists in the region; encourage SEEMO to promote the establishment of independent regulatory agencies in the media sector in the region.

29. regret that in some countries the legislative framework obstructs media freedom by imposing disproportionate sanctions; deplore that there are still journalists facing court cases or losing their jobs on the basis of opinions they have expressed; urge the governments to decriminalise defamation, lower fines against media outlets, and properly implement the legislation that protects media freedom.

On the involvement of civil society organisations in the enlargement process:

The participants:

30. welcome the fact that the Economic and Social Councils or similar institutions in the Western Balkans have all-in-all improved their functioning in the past two years; they encourage these institutions to focus their work on providing their expertise to the government on the key pieces of legislation in their areas of competence and to pursue their efforts to publicise their work and get more attention both from the media and from the general public; they in parallel insist that the governments must respect their obligation to consult those bodies on public policies and draft laws.
31. encourage the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to pursue and extend the assistance it provides to the social partners and governments; stress that ILO technical support on issues such as health and safety at work, social dialogue, or on reducing the gender pay gap is key to further progress in the region; ask the governments to fully implement their Decent Work Country Programmes and to enable the effective implementation of fundamental rights at work.
32. ask the governments in the region to involve and support on an equal footing the social partners and other civil society organisations closely in their national strategies and policies towards EU accession, and in their programming and implementation of EU-funded projects.
33. call on the EU delegations to develop consultations with ESCs and to make efforts to extend their ongoing regular consultations with some CSOs to grass root organisations. Those consultations should be further developed on the programming of EU funds and on the draft progress reports, when appropriate.
34. call on the EC to provide an increased support aiming at strengthening the capacities of civil society organisations; emphasise that further efforts would be particularly needed on the assistance provided to social partners in this respect.
35. call on the European affairs committees of the parliaments in the region to open up their work to the expertise and inputs of civil society organisations, when appropriate; also ask the European Parliament to promote this idea during its regular contacts with national parliaments in the region.

36. advise all the countries to set-up national councils for European integration that would bring high-level political authorities and key civil society organisations together on a regular basis with a view to making the process towards EU integration more transparent and publicising it more widely.
37. stress the urgent need for the public authorities to take stronger action, in partnership with civil society organisations, to better protect the rights of minorities; ask the governments to increase the employment of minorities in public administration; urge the governments and EU institutions to provide support to ensure the involvement of young people in the enlargement process.
38. also highlight that the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender) community still suffers from widespread prejudice and discrimination and ask the governments to align their legislation to the EU acquis, to implement it and to fund public campaigns to fight against prejudice.
39. call on the political authorities in the countries of the region to set-up strong and independent Ombudsman institutions; stress that Ombudsmen can make a decisive contribution, complementing the work of civil society organisations working on fundamental rights and in particular on the protection of minorities.

On rural development and employment in the Western Balkans:

The participants:

40. are concerned that the countries' level of preparedness for taking-up the EU acquis on agriculture and rural development policies is low; they highlight that rural areas in the region are faced with under equipped infrastructures, a high unemployment rate, a lack of skilled labour and a lack of investment support.
41. stress that in some countries a land cadastre still needs to be established and that in most of them, rural development institutions are not in place and further efforts are needed to adopt and implement strategies for agriculture and land use.
42. call on the EC to simplify but to maintain tight control on the access to IPARD - the Instrument for Pre Accession in Rural Development – which remains the main source of financial assistance for rural areas in the Western Balkans; in parallel, they call on the governments in the region to upgrade administrative capacity at national and local level in order to ease the absorption of IPARD funds; they stress that the EC must also increase TAIEX assistance to strengthen the administrative capacities of beneficiary countries.
43. ask the governments of the Western Balkans to allocate more funds to support sustainable rural development policies, raise agricultural productivity, allow the young generation to

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find job opportunities in rural areas by diversifying the rural economy; promote the set-up of associations and networks of civil society organisations in rural areas and encourage the authorities to implement in an appropriate manner the principle of partnership between governments and civil society in those areas; suggest that incentives for private investments be set up to develop rural infrastructures, a knowledge-based agriculture integrated with the food industry and more entrepreneurial human capital; suggest that agri- and eco-tourism based on the rich cultural, historical and natural heritage, as well as the development of renewable energies are opportunities to be encouraged when aiming at a diverse rural economy.

44. support the proposal of the EC for the next programming period of the EU Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II) 2014-2020 to abolish the differentiation between candidate and potential candidate countries in accessing assistance in agriculture and rural development; stress that this will allow assistance to be better tailored to the needs of individual countries and abolish the constraint of political criteria.
45. ask the governments to take active measures to combat rural unemployment, poverty and social exclusion, with a particular attention to women, minorities, including people with disabilities, and young people, in consultation with the social partners and other civil society organisations; recommend that better coordination between different policies and the various funds available be achieved.
46. encourage civil society organisations to extend their presence and actions in rural areas where their coverage is still limited; recommend that they create networks in order to mutually benefit from their activities and reach a critical mass of population and area covered.

Programme of joint activities with the EESC:

The participants:

47. call on the EESC to carry out a follow-up to this fourth Forum through its Western Balkans Contact Group and through regular contacts with the Forum participants and other interested parties.
48. support initiatives aimed at drafting opinions and reports on topics of regional interest, for example on gender equality, on the role of civil society in the fight against corruption, or on minority rights.
49. encourage the establishment of new civil society Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs) with civil society organisations in the countries in the region; recall that the new JCCs will complement the three existing ones, which were set-up successfully together with candidate countries in the Western Balkans; also support the view that more JCC meetings should be

held in the Western Balkan countries rather than in Brussels, in order to better include local civil society organisations in the debates on enlargement policy.

50. charge the EESC to transmit this final declaration to the governments of the region, the European institutions, CSOs of the Western Balkans and their partner organisations in the EU, the Regional Cooperation Council, the International Labour Organisation, and the European Training Foundation.
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