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**FINAL DECLARATION**

**8th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum**

**Skopje, 30 September - 1 October**

1. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), representing organised civil society in the European Union (EU), held its 8th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum with the support of the European Commission and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). The forum brought together, physically or online, representatives of Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo[[1]](#footnote-1)⃰, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) trade unions, employers and civil society organisations (CSOs), EESC members, representatives of the governments of the Western Balkans, and EU and international institutions.

The forum participants adopted the following declaration:

*On a clear EU accession perspective for the Western Balkans*

The participants:

1. strongly support further EU enlargement to the Western Balkan countries, firmly believing that their integration represents a geostrategic investment in the peace, stability, security, and economic and social development of the entire continent;
2. regret that the enlargement process has been blocked once again, undermining trust in enlargement and the transformative power of the policy, and call for the EU to act as a credible partner: deliver on its promises of opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania and remove the obstacles that are preventing the start of negotiations as quickly as possible, as well as enable visa liberalisation for Kosovo citizens;
3. welcome the communications issued by the European Commission[[2]](#footnote-2) in 2020 and express their satisfaction with the basic principles of the revised methodology, especially the emphasis placed on the fundamentals cluster. An independent judiciary, pluralism, free and independent media, free elections, gender equality and an inclusive approach to organised civil society are core European values that need to be constantly upheld. However, without improving monitoring and assessment mechanisms, it is unrealistic to expect any significant changes or to expect the revised methodology to have a transformative effect;
4. therefore call for the production of a clear, tailor-made accession partnership roadmap for each of the Western Balkan countries and their integration into existing EU mechanisms. Stress that it is vital to better ascertain how the Western Balkans could progressively and conditionally access the right and benefits of EU membership;
5. fully support intra-regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and stress the need for all partners from the Western Balkans to be actively involved in such initiatives;
6. call for a rapid resolution of bilateral disputes as a precondition for accession, while stressing the importance of individual merit;
7. stress their belief that social partners and organised civil society has to play an active role in the enlargement process, bridging the gap between politics and people, and helping to monitor whether fundamental principles such as freedom of speech, the rule of law, the independence of the media, equal treatment and the fight against corruption and preventing conflicts of interest are actually implemented in practice;
8. point out that the systematic involvement of social partners and organised civil society in the planning, programming, implementation and monitoring processes related to accession reforms should be a principle that not only applies to and is expected from the governments of the Western Balkans but is also practised by the EU institutions themselves;
9. recommend that, in order to rebuild confidence in enlargement and strengthen ways in which the EU reaches out to its closest partners in the region, the EU should include political leaders and members of the public from the Western Balkans in certain activities and discussions held in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) on a consultative basis. In that sense, they also encourage social partners and CSOs from the Western Balkans and the EU Member States to establish direct links by building networks and ad-hoc collaborations;
10. emphasise the importance of young people for the future of the Western Balkans and therefore the importance of taking concrete measures to turn the region into a place with future prospects and opportunities for young people, enabling them to stay and prosper;
11. call upon the current Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU and the upcoming French and Czech Presidencies to keep the enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans high on the EU's agenda.

*On post-COVID-19 recovery – challenges and opportunities of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans and the Common Regional Market*

The participants:

1. stress that measures undertaken in a crisis, including epidemiologic crises such as the one caused by COVID-19, must be proportionate to the threat they are addressing and in accordance with national constitutions and international standards and conventions, so that they do not contradict the principles of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. The legal guarantees for freedom of association, assembly and expression need to be protected and consistently implemented in practice at all levels. Stronger promotion of philanthropy, coupled with increased incentives for the private sector, with special focus on more quality jobs, is extremely important for the post-COVID-19 recovery;
2. invite all Western Balkans partners to ratify the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, since during the COVID-19 pandemic a growing number of violence at the workplace, as well as closely linked domestic violence, has been recorded. This phenomenon disproportionately affects women and girls and their position in the world of work;
3. welcome the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the Western Balkans as a great opportunity for the region to prosper economically and converge with the EU, but also to reinvent its societies in the post-COVID-19 period, building them on the principles of inclusivity, trust and cooperation. They remind the governments from the region that, in pursuing their EU-driven reforms and implementing their investment plans, they committed themselves to the core European values of democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights, as well as reconciliation;
4. emphasise that financial resources provided by the EU should be invested to support social and economic recovery in the Western Balkans through measures such as regional cooperation projects and actions dedicated to strengthening the competitiveness of SMEs and strategic development areas, as proposed by business associations. They call for the Western Balkans to reshape their economies into social market economies able to face future challenges and to support post-COVID-19 recovery;
5. stress that social partners and organised civil society must be involved meaningfully and in a timely manner in policy-making, implementation and monitoring processes and represented in cross-sector bodies, including those involved in implementing the EIP such as the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) and national investment committees;
6. emphasise that, in order to ensure real and substantial participation, as well as the credibility of and trust in the process, CSOs must have unrestricted and timely access to information, be included in the early stages of drafting and get feedback on their contributions. Stress that an improved approach to social partners and organised civil society involvement in policy-making will help improve public trust in governments and strengthen democracies in crisis and beyond. During crises in particular, governments should closely cooperate and coordinate with CSOs in the provision of services to vulnerable groups;
7. emphasise the importance of a well-functioning Common Regional Market (CRM), with a special focus on fully implementing the four freedoms in the region according to the model of the EU single market, as the cornerstone of social and economic resilience in the region in the post-COVID-19 period. Appeal to all countries in the Western Balkans to swiftly enable concrete deliverables stemming from the CRM, for the benefit of members of the public, workers and companies in the region, such as free movement of people within the region and mutual recognition of academic and professional qualifications;
8. expect that the EIP will be fully complementary with the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance for the period 2021-2027 (IPA III), the CRM and the Green Agenda and that it will lead the region towards structural changes in areas such as the environment, energy, transport, infrastructure, education and science, and in the direction of green and digital transition. Stress the importance of sustainable connectivity as a cornerstone of the economic and social integration of the Western Balkans, and the need for a bottom-up approach in designing funding schemes;
9. emphasise the achievements of the regional Green Lanes in quickly and effectively ensuring the flow of medical and food supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Praise the coordination role of the RCC, the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) and the Transport Community (TCT) in the creation and consolidation of the Green Lanes.

*On the contribution of civil society to the Green Agenda and the sustainable development of the Western Balkans as part of the EU accession process*

The participants:

1. point out that the Western Balkans are highly sensitive to the impacts of climate change, resulting in damage to general health and the economy. Urgent action is needed to better protect the health and quality of life of their citizens, especially children and young people, through a just transition to a greener model, while bearing in mind the "no one should be left behind" principle. Stress that the region's resilience with regard to climate change needs to be increased by reducing harmful practices, preventing pollution and degradation of rivers and seas and implementing strict policies for the protection of biodiversity;
2. welcome the European Green Deal[[3]](#footnote-3), which includes specific objectives for the Western Balkans, as well as the Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans accompanying the EIP for the Western Balkans[[4]](#footnote-4) and call on the partners from the region to work with the EU to adopt green policies by 2030 and achieve climate neutrality by 2050. Emphasise that the aim of the Agenda is to stimulate the economies in the Western Balkans while bringing the region in line with the EU's environmental standards and climate objectives;
3. strongly believe that, considering the significant investments and regulatory adaptations required, social partners and organised civil society have a particularly important role to play in the transition towards a greener and more sustainable society, especially as regards specific political contexts in the Western Balkans. Stress that social partners and organised civil society are ready to provide its expertise and watch over the implementation of the Green Agenda, to check whether all investments support the green transition and to hold governments to account;
4. call for future actions towards greener and sustainable development in the Western Balkans to be adapted to the region's specific challenges and needs, including an adequate regulatory framework, cross-border activities, innovative technological solutions, locally produced and consumed energy and energy efficiency, sustainable urban transport, road and rail networks, public and private engagement, ICT and fast internet deployment, agri-food measures, etc. They also call for greater consideration of how existing instruments such as the Energy Community Treaty and Transport Community Treaty can be used to ensure the effective implementation of the Green Agenda;
5. consider that the challenges of decarbonisation, depollution of air, water and soil, connectivity and climate change in the Western Balkans can be turned into opportunities by investing in research and innovation, learning and adopting alternative approaches, implementing a circular economy, improving waste management, using greener energy and adopting connectivity solutions, as well as taking active measures to protect the region's rich biodiversity. These policies should be developed and implemented in cooperation with the private sector and social partners;
6. consider that public debate about energy transition should be proactive and consistent and a wide range of voices should be listened to, including householders, SMEs and local authorities. Strongly believe that the EU should focus on and increase its support for the expert community, social partners and organised civil society in order to reach the wider citizenry and bridge the gap between national institutions and the wider public, as they are the real drivers of change with a view to meeting the goals of the Green Agenda;
7. welcome the Coal Regions in Transition initiative for the Western Balkans and call for an assessment of the social and economic impact of decarbonisation at individual economy and regional level with a view to a just transition;
8. stress the importance of developing adequate green competences and digital skills within active national and regional education/training and skills strategies, with a particular focus on gender equality, in cooperation with relevant actors and within an effective social dialogue. They emphasise the need to invest in and create quality jobs in the green and digital sectors, also paying special attention to rural areas;
9. look forward to the action plan for the implementation of the Green Agenda, which is currently being drawn up by the RCC, and hope that social partners and organised civil society will have a prominent role in establishing an effective and efficient monitoring system. The entire process rests on regional ownership and the involvement of relevant stakeholders – both regional organisations and organised civil society.

*On the situation of civil society in the Western Balkans*

The participants:

1. stress the importance of guaranteeing freedom of association and ensuring an enabling civic space, as well as the need to enhance support for CSO capacity building for a strong and effective civil dialogue. Emphasise that public funding for CSOs needs to be reformed in all countries in the region in terms of ensuring the stability of the funding available and the diversity of the arrangements, increasing transparency and accountability, and ensuring that it is free from political influence;
2. call for all national and European authorities to take action to make sure that the place, funding and role of social partners and organised civil society in the Western Balkans, as well as in the European Union, do not become compromised in the crisis recovery process, as civil society is a core actor in any true democracy. They also call for support for civil society to be adjusted by investing in organisations instead of projects;
3. recommend that the EU country reports follow a clear structure for monitoring how Western Balkan governments deal with civil society in line with the DG NEAR Guidelines and Strategic Directions for EU Support to Civil Society in the Enlargement Region for the period 2021-2027, thus providing a basis for responding with political actions, where backsliding would have consequences and progress would bring tangible benefits. Moreover, to keep a check on the transparency and accountability of Western Balkan political elites, the EU should commission regular "shadow" reports on the state of democracy from CSOs in the region;
4. stress that the EU should impose zero tolerance for hate speech and attacks on activists and the media, including by withholding EU financial, political and operational support from candidate countries;
5. call for high-level civil society conferences such as this forum to be organised as side events to the regular EU-Western Balkans summits in order to allow the voice of civil society to be heard on the subjects addressed at the summits. They stress that such consultations are vital to ensure objective, bottom-up monitoring of progress in the negotiating process;
6. invite the EU institutions and the Western Balkan governments to strengthen the overall capacities of the social partners, while at the same time fully preserving their independence. A functioning social dialogue should be an important part of the EU accession negotiations. Social partners should be consulted more systematically and in a timely matter on all legislative proposals and strategic documents which they consider relevant;
7. invite the Western Balkan governments to develop their own mechanism for efficient and inclusive formal social dialogue (including collective bargaining) at all levels, as an important part of the EU social model. This model must be developed following the principles of equal treatment of all stakeholders.

Skopje, 1 October 2021

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1. ⃰ 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. COM(2020) 57 final (5.2.2020) [*Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans*](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0057); COM(2020) 641 final (6.10.2020) [*An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans*](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0641); COM(2020) 660 final (SWD(2020) 350 final) – (SWD(2020) 351 final) – (SWD(2020) 352 final) – (SWD(2020) 353 final) – (SWD(2020) 354 final) – (SWD(2020) 355 final) – (SWD(2020) 356 final) (6.10.2020) [2020 Communication on EU enlargement policy](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/GA/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0660). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. COM(2019) 640 final (11.12.2019) [*The European Green Deal*](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52019DC0640) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. SWD(2020) 223 final (COM(2020) 641 final) (6.10.2020) [*Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans accompanying the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans*](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/green_agenda_for_the_western_balkans_en.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)