



European Economic and Social Committee

3rd WESTERN BALKANS CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM

Brussels, 18-19 May 2010

CONCLUSIONS

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 third 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.

After two days of discussion, the Forum participants have adopted the following conclusions:

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Regarding the progress made in the region towards EU accession, the participants

- commend the candidate and potential candidate countries for EU accession in the Western Balkans on their progress towards accession.
- insist that the countries of the region, on their paths towards EU accession, devote more resources to the implementation of newly adopted legislation.
- call on the remaining authorities in the region concerned to deliver results so that their citizens can be granted visa free travel to and throughout the Schengen area by the EU.
- recommend that the fight against corruption and the issue of minorities remain top political priorities for the countries of the region.

Regarding economic and social rights, the participants

- call on the Governments of the Western Balkans to promote social dialogue and fully respect and implement worker's rights, also in times of crisis.
- urge the Governments to realise the potential of Economic and Social Councils and use them as effective tools for consulting and informing social partners, in order to address all relevant economic and social concerns.
- call on the EU institutions to grant the candidate and potential candidate countries observer status at the European Agency for Fundamental Rights, and to support the effective implementation of economic and social rights.

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- support the rapid establishment and functioning of Vocational Education and Training Councils in all of the Western Balkan countries.
- call on governments to create a business- and investment- friendly environment in order to support the development and setting-up of enterprises, especially SMEs, as well as the creation of new jobs.

Regarding the future treaty establishing a Transport community between the EU and the Western Balkans, the participants

- encourage the political authorities of the region to consider sustainable transport infrastructure projects as a priority to be tackled through regional cooperation.
- urge the Governments of the region to engage in dialogue with CSOs on the future implementation of the treaty establishing a Transport community.
- underline that the recommendations which will be adopted by the representatives involved in the regional social forum and the environmental forum must be implemented by ministerial meetings within the Transport Community.

Regarding the aim of reinforcing the capacities of civil society organisations in the region,

- call on the Governments to develop and enforce a legal environment that supports civil society and urge them to develop and implement a strategy that will increase the level of dialogue and cooperation between public authorities and CSOs.
- welcome the development of the Civil Society Facility, which is a European Commission programme, and encourage the Commission to tailor the Facility better to the needs of small, local CSOs.
- support the initiative introduced by the Regional Cooperation Council aimed at enhancing economic and social dialogue at regional level in the Western Balkans.
- ask the European Commission to support technical assistance and capacity building efforts aimed at labour ministries and social partners.

The participants call on the EESC to fully involve the highest political authorities of the Western Balkans countries and the EU in the fourth Western Balkans Civil Society Forum.

Relations between the Western Balkan countries and the EU

1. The participants welcome the progress made in the region towards the common goal of accession to the European Union. They note that the EU institutions have worked consistently to fulfil the promise of a European perspective for the region and that positive, concrete steps have been taken in recent months which have brought the region closer to this shared goal.
2. Among these positive steps, the participants welcome, in particular, the decision taken by the Council of the EU to allow visa-free travel, as of 19 December 2009, to and throughout the

Schengen area for citizens of three countries in the region. They call on the authorities of the other countries of the region to deliver results in line with the agreed benchmarks under the visa liberalisation dialogue, so that the white Schengen list can be extended to the citizens of the whole Western Balkans. They stress that this process will play a pivotal role in encouraging exchanges between the EU and the region and that young people and students should especially benefit from it. They should then be offered more opportunities to obtain traineeships and scholarships in the EU.

3. The participants note that since the last EESC Western Balkans Forum was held in June 2008, two additional Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAA) with countries in the region have entered into force. They request the EU member states to proceed with the ratification of the remaining SAAs.
4. They welcome the enthusiasm for the EU amongst the public in the Western Balkans which has led three more Governments in the region to officially apply for EU membership. The participants call on the European Commission (EC) to assess these applications on the basis of a broad and transparent consultation. They ask the EC to consult with local CSOs and to take their views into consideration when evaluating the readiness of each country for EU accession. They underline that the EC must carry out an assessment of the level of participatory democracy, the functioning of social and civil dialogue, throughout this process.
5. On the issue of regional cooperation, the participants stress the fact that good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation are key political priorities in the progress of the Western Balkans countries towards EU accession. The participants welcome the work achieved so far by the Regional Cooperation Council, two years after it started operating, and encourage it to develop further projects of regional interest, especially in the fields of infrastructure and economic and social cooperation, together with relevant stakeholders.
6. The participants also urge all stakeholders to make a success of the EU-Western Balkans Summit to be held in Sarajevo on 2 June 2010 on the initiative of the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU, which will mark the tenth anniversary of the Zagreb Declaration. They believe that this high-level Summit will be an important opportunity for the region to demonstrate tangible improvements in regional cooperation.

Reform progress in the region

7. The participants commend the countries of the region on their progress in aligning themselves with European standards. However, they call on the authorities of the region to devote time and appropriate financial means to guaranteeing that the newly adopted legislation is also properly implemented. Analyses of the progress made by authorities in implementing legislation should become a core feature of the EC progress report, and should be conducted in close cooperation with CSOs in the region. They acknowledge that the current context of economic and financial

crisis has made this period of transition and economic reform more difficult, owing to tighter budgetary constraints at the Government and local levels.

8. In addition, they stress that the pursuit of democratisation, enforcing the rule of law and the fight against corruption and organised crime remain major challenges for the region's future. They also recall that progress still needs to be made regarding the protection of minorities, one of the key priorities of the Copenhagen criteria.
9. Since 2010 has been designated as the year for combating poverty and social exclusion at EU level, the participants call on the European Commission to support projects in this field in the Western Balkans, as these remain key challenges for the region as well. They emphasise that projects targeting the inclusion of Roma and disabled persons would be of particular relevance in the region.
10. The participants draw a parallel between *enlargement fatigue*, the term used to describe the way new waves of enlargement are perceived in some EU member states, and the *reform fatigue* which has become apparent in public opinion across the Western Balkan countries. The participants stress that involving citizens and grass root CSOs more regularly in consultations with their respective Governments on EU affairs would help the wider public to understand and buy into the political priority of EU accession.. It would also lead to a better dissemination of information on the EU and thus allow the reforms made necessary by EU accession to be appropriated better by the public.

Implementation of economic and social rights

11. The participants note that the legal systems in most of the countries in the region guarantee basic economic and social rights for workers and citizens. Freedom of assembly and freedom of association are generally respected and the countries have ratified the relevant International Labour Conventions.
12. However, they regret that the implementation of economic and social rights is not yet satisfactory in all areas of the region. They acknowledge that the current financial and economic crisis has presented a major challenge to workers' rights in some sectors of the economy. However, they stress that this difficult context must not prevent the Governments of the region to take all the necessary steps to better respect and implement workers' rights.
13. The participants called on the Governments to create a business- and investment- friendly environment in order to support the setting-up and development of enterprises, especially SMEs, and ensure faster growth and job creation.
14. They urge the Governments of the Western Balkans to realise the potential of Economic and Social Councils and use them as effective tools for consulting and informing social partners so that all relevant economic and social concerns are addressed. They insist that the Governments

must commit themselves to the goal of making Economic and Social Councils fully functioning, transparent, and representative bodies.

15. They request the European Commission to devote specific attention to developments in social and civil dialogue in its yearly progress reports on enlargement countries.
16. The participants point out that one of the major threats to economic and social rights in the region is the major impact of the informal economy and undeclared work. In addition to calling on the Governments to reinforce labour inspections in the region, the participants request them also to find appropriate incentives for people to register and obtain registered employment and work. In this respect, they underline that cutting red tape wherever overwhelming bureaucratic burden exists could be one way of facilitating legal job creation.
17. They welcome the expertise and projects led by the International Labour Organisation in the Western Balkans and note the progress being made through the Decent Work Country Programmes in the countries of the region which implement these programmes. They call on the social partners of the region to make full use of the expertise of the ILO in order to pressure their respective Governments into acknowledging where the difficulties lie and to focus on achieving results. They call on the European Commission to support the implementation of Decent Work Country Programmes.
18. Regarding the aim of better integrating older workers, women, young people, disabled persons, and minorities in the labour market, the participants urge the Governments to take appropriate measures. They note that the European Training Foundation (ETF) can assist the Governments in the region in providing expertise and training. In particular, they support the view that setting up vocational education and training councils with the support of the ETF, where applicable, will help improve the situation.
19. On the broader issue of fundamental rights, the participants welcome the overall progress that has been achieved in the recent period as a result of the work of local civil society organisations and the commitment of Governments. However, they underline once more that full respect for minority rights is still an important issue in the region, and that regional cooperation should play a pivotal role in achieving results in this area. They welcome the recent move towards the adoption, where applicable, of anti-discrimination laws in the region and call on the other countries to proceed with the adoption of such laws. They also stress the need for these laws to fully comply with European standards and call for appropriate means to be allocated in order to enforce these new laws.
20. In order to obtain a regular assessment and update of the situation on fundamental rights based on concrete facts and figures, the participants officially call on the EU institutions and EU member states to extend the membership of the European Agency for Fundamental Rights. In their opinion, all the candidate and potential candidate countries to EU accession should be granted observer status so that they can obtain assistance and expertise in the above fields.

Transport Community

21. The participants welcome the future Treaty establishing a Transport Community between the European Union and the Western Balkan countries. They underline the importance of sustainable transport infrastructure projects in further integrating the economies of the Western Balkans into the European single market. They stress that transport infrastructure projects also play a crucial role in enabling the region to engage in cross-border cooperation that is potentially beneficial both at the political level and in the day-to-day life of citizens.
22. As regards financial resources, they call on international financial institutions, the EU, and Governments of the region to allocate appropriate funding in order to develop major infrastructure projects. Full use of the newly created Western Balkans Investment Framework should be made for this purpose. They also highlight the fact that investments must focus on identified core regional networks and their strategic links, and that these must be closely coordinated with the trans-European transport networks (TEN-T) and their future development at EU level.
23. They note that the future implementation of the treaty will lead to reforms and major restructuring of the transport sector in all of the Western Balkan countries. They insist on the need to take into due consideration the social dimension in all areas of the Transport Community's future work. They call on the Governments to engage in dialogue with social partners and relevant civil society organisations so that specific consultation platforms at national level are set up which make regular consultations on the implementation of the future treaty possible.
24. At regional level the participants call on the technical committees that will form part of the institutional mechanisms within the Transport Community to involve civil society organisations in their future work.
25. The participants call on social partners to be actively involved in the future work of the Social Forum which is to be set-up under the Transport Community. In particular, the Social Forum will discuss ways to mitigate the social impact of the reform of the transport sector in the region.
26. They propose that in parallel to the Social Forum an Environmental Forum be set-up. This Environmental Forum would involve CSO representatives from the region and from the EU. Stakeholders in this Forum would make recommendations aimed at de-carbonising transport and, more generally, would ensure that other sustainable development factors are taken into consideration in the work of the Transport Community.
27. The participants underline that the recommendations which will be adopted by the representatives involved in both the Social and the Environmental Fora at regional level must be implemented. The meetings that will take place at minister level within the Transport

Community must be responsible for this implementation and give precise indications each year that follow up the recommendations put forward by these two Fora.

Strengthening dialogue and reinforcing the capacities of civil society organisations in the region

28. The participants reiterate the request already made during the 2nd EESC Western Balkans Civil Society Forum to the Governments of the countries in the region to fully respect the activities of legitimate, independent and representative civil society organisations, to encourage the development of social and civil dialogue, *inter alia* by drawing up an appropriate regulatory framework and, subsequently, to take more account of the opinions, recommendations and know-how of civil society organisations. They insist that in some countries of the region more efforts need to be made by the Governments, in particular as regards the legal environment and the level of dialogue and cooperation between public authorities and CSOs. They call on Governments, where applicable, to adopt and implement a strategy for the development of civil society, based on intense and regular consultations with CSOs.
29. To achieve further progress towards these challenging goals, the participants welcome the support offered by the European Commission through the Civil Society Facility. They support the view that the Facility contributes to reinforcing the capacity of CSOs. It also enables local CSOs to become more knowledgeable about the EU *acquis* and the functioning of the EU institutions through its People-2-People Programme.
30. To further improve the existing mechanisms of the Civil Society Facility, the participants call on the European Commission to also publish its call for proposals in local languages and to use local media so that smaller organisations can also benefit from the Facility and apply for grants. They also suggest that the practice of re-granting be developed, i.e. that certain local organisations, through calls for proposals, be responsible for re-distributing global grants in the form of smaller-scale grants to support local projects led by smaller CSOs. Furthermore, they call on the European Commission to speed up the allocation of grants to beneficiaries once these have been selected.
31. The participants also ask the European Commission to allocate funds for technical assistance and capacity building, targeting ministries of labour and social partners since they are key players in economic reforms that have an impact on the daily life of citizens in the Western Balkans.
32. They support the initiative introduced by the Regional Cooperation Council which is aimed at enhancing economic and social dialogue at regional level in the Western Balkans. The participants call on the European Economic and Social Committee to assist the setting-up process and to garner political support at EU level so that this concrete project for regional cooperation at civil society level can be put in to practice for the benefit of the whole region.

Programme of joint activities with the EESC

33. The participants call on the EESC to carry out a follow-up to this third Forum through its Western Balkans Contact Group, and through regular contacts with the Forum participants and other interested parties.
 34. They support initiatives aiming at drafting opinions on topics of regional interest, for example agriculture and rural development, sustainable development and assessments of the ESCs and similar institutions in the Western Balkans.
 35. The participants support the establishment of new Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs) with civil society organisations in the countries in the region. These new JCCs will complement the two existing ones, which were set-up successfully together with candidate countries in the Western Balkans. The SAAs signed with the EU and ratified by the parties should provide a legal basis for this. They recall that new JCCs will be set-up and start working when the countries of the Western Balkans have been granted candidate country status by the European Council.
 36. The participants ask the EESC to support the development of social dialogue and civil society in general in the region, in cooperation with the European Commission. They encourage the EESC to continue to monitor, through study visits and other relevant means, the opinions adopted on the situation of civil society in the region. They recognise the role the EESC plays as a bridge between civil society organisations in candidate and potential candidate countries and the European confederations, European platforms and European networks of CSOs active in the region. The participants also call for the involvement of EESC members in efforts to bring about closer cooperation with the European Commission Civil Society Facility.
 37. EESC members could participate in the work of the Social Forum which is to be set-up in the framework of the Transport Community and share its expertise on transport-related issues with CSOs from the region. EESC members could also participate in the work of the Environmental Forum whose creation has been requested by the participants.
 38. The participants plan to hold a fourth Western Balkans Civil Society Forum in 2012 to review the development of the situation in the region as well as cooperation between the EESC and Western Balkans civil society organisations.
 39. Finally, the participants have decided that these conclusions should be transmitted to the national Governments of the region and of the EU, the European institutions, CSOs of the Western Balkans and their partners organisations in the EU, the Regional Cooperation Council, the International Labour Organisation, the European Training Foundation, the European Agency for Fundamental Rights, and the South East Europe Transport Observatory.
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