



FINAL DECLARATION

9th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum

Thessaloniki, 19-20 October 2023

1. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), representing organised civil society in the European Union (EU), held its 9th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum with the support of the European Commission, the European Training Foundation (ETF), the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). The forum brought together representatives of trade unions, employers and civil society organisations (CSOs) from the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia), EESC members, representatives of EU institutions and agencies, and international organisations and networks.
2. The 9th edition of the Forum took place in Thessaloniki, Greece, to mark the symbolic 20th anniversary of the 2003 EU-Western Balkans Summit. Two decades after that summit affirmed that the future of the Western Balkans was within the EU, the new geopolitical landscape shaped by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has reignited the momentum for EU enlargement. The Forum is an important step towards opening the EU's doors to the Western Balkans, following up on the EESC's decision to involve EU candidate countries in its work as of 2024, by appointing "Enlargement Candidate Members".
3. This declaration outlines a series of calls from organised civil society and serves as a contribution by the EU and Western Balkans civil society to the next EU-Western Balkans Summit announced by the President of the European Council and expected to take place in December 2023. Finally, the conclusions of the forum will also be communicated to EU institutions, civil society organisations and the region's public authorities.

The forum participants adopted the following declaration:

* 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.

On the EU accession path for the Western Balkans and the importance of European values

The participants:

4. now more than ever, resolutely support further EU enlargement to the Western Balkans region, since its rapid integration into the EU represents a geostrategic investment in the peace, security, and economic and social prosperity of Europe;
5. strongly support the idea of setting a clear and realistic timeline for the Western Balkan partners to become members of the EU; welcome the mention of 2030 as a target date by which both the EU and the Western Balkans should be ready for enlargement, and call on all stakeholders to do everything necessary to enable this to become a reality;
6. note that, since enlargement is a merit-based process, some countries might complete the EU accession process more quickly than others;
7. look forward with anticipation to the European Commission's 2023 Enlargement Package and its announced pre-enlargement policy reviews on a number of key areas, as they are aware that the EU needs to be able and ready to function with additional Member States;
8. stress that all current and future EU Member States need to fully and sincerely adhere to European values, and would therefore welcome the inclusion of all EU candidate and pre-candidate countries in the development of yearly rule of law and fundamental rights reports; point out the crucial role of social partners and CSOs in this process and highlight that functioning social and civic dialogue are a crucial part of a democratic society;
9. are not opposed to staged accession of the Western Balkans to the EU, whereby Western Balkans partners would gradually integrate into existing EU mechanisms and funds, provided the ultimate goal is their full accession to the EU;
10. congratulate the EESC on being the first EU body to start implementing an "Enlargement Candidate Members" initiative that, in 2024, will open the door for representatives of trade unions, employers and CSOs from EU candidate countries, including those representing youth, to participate in an advisory capacity in important EESC activities that focus on enlargement;
11. support intra-regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and regional initiatives that are fully inclusive, and call for a rapid resolution to all conflicts and bilateral disputes; stress that social partners and organised civil society should play an active role in the reconciliation process;
12. invite the EU institutions and the Western Balkan governments to strengthen the genuine involvement and overall capacities of the social partners, while at the same time fully preserving their independence.

On education, youth, training and lifelong skills development, in the context of the European Year of Skills

The participants:

13. acknowledge the reforms that have already been undertaken, but call for further reinforcement of EU programmes, regional structures and government policies on youth, with the aim of making youth a priority and of reaching more young people in the Western Balkans with opportunities for education, employment, guidance, mobility and volunteering;
14. suggest substantially increasing efforts to offer young people from the Western Balkans access to university education in the EU. New scholarships and/or loans within or outside the Erasmus+ scheme that can be forgiven after the beneficiary returns to the country of origin would establish an effective tool to counter brain drain. Equally, it is essential to increase the skills of the workforce in the region, as human capital development is crucial for people and the economy as well as for good governance in the context of the accession process;
15. call for a stronger focus on vocational education and training (VET) in a lifelong learning perspective, by combining high-quality vocational education at secondary, post-secondary and higher level, apprenticeship schemes and continuing training; stress the importance of VET institutions in the Western Balkans and the need to build their capacities;
16. strongly emphasise the importance of strengthening public-private partnerships in fostering youth employability through implementation of the Youth Guarantee. The CSOs can play an important role in outreach and guidance for NEET ("Not in Education, Employment, or Training") young people, thus building a bridge with public authorities at all levels of government. CSOs should be recognised as potential service providers in the field of career guidance, training, skills development, and employment; structural cooperation between public institutions and social partners in implementing Youth Guarantee schemes should be supported on an ongoing basis;
17. stress the importance of recognition of non-formal and informal learning and innovative practices such as the one-stop-shop methodology for youth employability, together with systematic, professional and learner-centred career guidance services;
18. believe that close collaboration with social partners and business associations on education and training must be enhanced. Constant engagement of social partners must be part of the policy, and be focused much more on learning in the workplace; skilling and re-skilling should be kept up to date and designed to offer a concrete and attainable benefit to individuals, and should be directed both towards occupations that have become in short supply and towards the jobs of the future;

19. call for investment in the capacity and professionalisation of practitioners, teachers and trainers in order for them to develop appropriate pedagogical skills and capacity to work with adults, not only to provide training, but also to reach out to, guide and motivate them;
20. stress the importance of developing adequate green and digital skills within active national and regional education/training and skills strategies, which should prioritise gender equality in particular and pay special attention to quality jobs in rural areas and disadvantaged regions;
21. advocate a new vision of lifelong learning and skills development, where all people are supported and able to update and upgrade their competences systematically, and where companies become learning-conducive work environments that systematically demand and supply training, act collectively and share responsibility; stress the need for citizens, especially workers, to have direct access to relevant funds;
22. support the development of well-functioning and inclusive continuing vocational education and training (CVET) systems underpinned by multilevel and multi-stakeholder CVET governance and strong stakeholder partnerships and social dialogue;
23. fully support the "leave no one behind" principle, call for efforts to foster the participation of those most vulnerable and/or at risk and/or disengaged, and advocate targeted approaches to specific target groups most in need (including women, elderly people, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, etc.).

On the contribution of civil society to the implementation of the Green Agenda and the sustainable development of the Western Balkans

The participants:

24. emphasise that the aim of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans is to stimulate the economies in the Western Balkans to achieve compliance with the EU acquis and transition towards a carbon-neutral society; point out that progress in reaching the commitments in the Agenda has been slow and that the very limited implementation is also due to the lack of clear timetables and of clarity on specific pathways in the action plan for its implementation;
25. 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 by gradually phasing out coal and making 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, lakes and seas and implementing strict policies for the protection of biodiversity; call for Western Balkans governments to respect EU environmental standards and transparency of non-EU actors financing in sectors such as metallurgy, energy, the rubber industry and mining;

26. stress that safeguarding biodiversity and ecosystems is essential for achieving climate neutrality in the Western Balkan countries, and call for the implementation of measures to meet the set objectives of creating a coherent network of well-managed protected areas, in line with EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and Natura 2000;
27. call for the EU and Western Balkans to use the energy crises caused by Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine as a catalyst for a green transition, and for the Western Balkan partners to be incorporated in EU mechanisms designed to mitigate these kinds of crises; point out the discrepancy between the formal adoption by the Western Balkan countries of rules derived from Energy Community Treaty and Transport Community Treaty and the lack of implementation of those rules; call for swift implementation of the Energy Community Policy Guidelines on identifying and addressing energy poverty and the Transport Community Strategy for Sustainable and Smart Mobility in the Western Balkans to make transport greener, sustainable, and healthier for the citizens of the Western Balkans;
28. stress that the EU should enhance its support to the region by establishing a more robust funding mechanism based on multi-level governance and providing a solid investment framework; at the same time countries in the Western Balkans should invest heavily in building administrative capacities at all levels in order to absorb these funds and implement all relevant projects successfully, in a transparent and accountable way;
29. are worried that certain flagship projects financed through the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans are fossil fuel projects that might hamper the ambition of climate neutrality;
30. strongly believe that, given 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;
31. point to the need to raise awareness about the importance of clean energy and environmental protection both among the general public and at policy level by launching public campaigns, and consider that public debate about energy transition should be proactive and consistent; strongly believe that the EU should focus on and increase its support for social partners and organised civil society in order to reach the wider public 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;
32. call for efforts to find a sustainable balance between economic and environmental interests instead of asking which of the two should be prioritised, and for better assessment of the social and economic impact of decarbonisation with a view to a just transition. The EU and Western Balkan countries should ensure that sufficient financial and administrative support is provided

to the private sector in the region, encouraging them to make sustained efforts towards a blue and green/circular economy.

Brussels, 20 October 2023.
