



Western Balkans Summit Vienna 2015

# Civil Society Forum

## Recommendations of the Civil Society Organisations for the Vienna Summit 2015

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Socio-economic and political reforms remain key for the successful European integration of the Western Balkans. This process can only be successful with the broad and comprehensive inclusion of civil society. Civil society, both through formal organisations and informal networks, articulates societal needs, communicates ideas and is able to push for change and reform. Thus, civil society involvement is central to any reforms and EU integration.

The Western Balkans Civil Society Forum constitutes one venue for civil society to articulate recommendations, make suggestions and be a critical and competent voice at the series of Western Balkans summits that began in Berlin in 2014 and continues in Vienna in 2015 and Paris in 2016. Three themes have been identified as key areas of social concern: the culture of regional cooperation, freedom of expression and the creation of jobs.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the three specific subjects, two cross-cutting themes emerge:

## **Democratic leadership with independent and transparent bodies**

The states and their institutions, including the rule of law and democratic practice, remain unconsolidated in all the countries of the Western Balkans. EU integration thus constitutes an important opportunity for the pursuit of reforms and the establishment of institutions and governance that ensure the countries' compatibility with the EU. Of particular importance for citizens is the rule of law, the independence and transparency of public services. State oversight has to be transparent and governed by clear rules and independent institutions. This is essential to ensure the democratisation of the countries in all spheres, such as in the public media. All citizens should be given the same rights and conditions in access to the public administration and the justice system, free from corruption and economic or political connections. If nothing else, a modern and EU-orientated state needs a democratic leadership including a respectful dialogue between all actors of politics and society.

## **Equal partners in political, economic and social development**

The governments of the Western Balkans should finally accept the civil society sector as an equal partner in the EU integration process and commit to funding civil society initiatives and networks that have delivered tangible results. They should also support civil society's regional initiatives that deal

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<sup>1</sup> These recommendations are the result of deliberations among approx. 120 civil society activists, members of think tanks and media, who discussed the themes in three workshops in the spring 2015 in Tirana, Sarajevo and Belgrade.



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with the past. A stronger support for regional cooperation in social development is needed, for example, by integrating social issues in the agendas for growth, by supporting cooperation between health networks or by intensifying student and academic mobility.



## Enhancing Regional Cooperation<sup>2</sup>

Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans is propelled by top-down, inter-governmental initiatives and bottom-up civil society activities. The former promote a culture of formal and institutionalised cooperation that is intensifying even though it does not always bring tangible results for individuals in the region. The latter promote a culture of vibrant and informal contacts between individuals and organisations deeply committed to improving regional cooperation, which contributes toward creating a sense of commonness, and are often pioneers in intensifying regional cooperation. It is thus crucial for civil society to be involved also in the top-down initiatives.

### **Dealing with the past and regional confidence building**

Civil society's commitment to regional cooperation is deep and sustained. Some initiatives were started long before political will was present. For example, the Igman initiative facilitated meetings between heads of state and government. In some areas, civil society organisations remain the front runner or even the sole runner in efforts to intensify regional cooperation, like the RECOM initiative dealing with the past. While regional cooperation is beneficial in many fields, improving mutual understanding, exploring and discussing difficult episodes of the common history remain important aspects of regional cooperation where civil society can and should play an active role.

### **Regional cooperation to increase human resources and to exchange best practices**

Some civil society regional cooperation initiatives have focused on social development issues, like building human capital or digital communities. Civil society initiatives are focused on joint interests or common goals. They are not burdened with political impediments, and they aim to exchange the best practices for reform in order to reach common standards and raise the quality of service. Civil society actors show their greatest capacities in contributing toward policies and strategies for enhancing regional cooperation in the area of social development. Civil society regional networks have aided national

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<sup>2</sup> These recommendations are drawn from a workshop organized by EFB held in Belgrade, 26 May 2015.



governments and the EU in their efforts to improve the institutional and legal environment for civil society.

### **Civil society networks as pillars of regional cooperation**

The grass-root regional cooperation rests on strong sentiments of a shared culture, on the one hand uniting countries of the former Yugoslavia, and on the other, bringing closer Albanian-speaking parts of the region. In that way, it helps to generate political will and public support for regional cooperation. As such, existing regional civil society networks and groups should be supported as mechanisms of confidence building and regional cooperation. A government-led regional cooperation should engage with these initiatives.

### **Involving civil society on all levels of regional cooperation**

Regional cooperation as a result of political or administrative cooperation is often top-down, paying little attention to the broad support regional cooperation enjoys or the existing civil society initiatives in the field. Regional cooperation, even when it is not obviously linked to civil society, such as in energy, policing or infrastructure, should include strong consultative mechanisms for civil society inclusions. If civil society organisations were included in different regional cooperation initiatives, they would have a stronger potential to contribute and to push EU integration further. For example, they might play the role of a watch dog on environmental issues. Or they could balance and complement efforts to enhance regional cooperation in energy and infrastructure or on good governance issues, like monitoring the implementation of reforms or forming national and regional platforms to advocate for policy improvements.

### **Strengthening the synergies of regional cooperation**

Over the past decades, a plethora of regional instruments and institutions have emerged. Some play complimentary roles, while others are overlapping and duplicating efforts. A careful stock-taking would help to ensure that the institutional landscape of regional cooperation is streamlined and more visible and transparent.



## Securing Freedom of Expression and Independent Media<sup>3</sup>

The freedom of the media is key for sustaining vibrant democracies. In recent years, media freedom has declined in many parts of the Western Balkans, as observed by key NGOs and international organisations. This decline has been the result of government interference in media through direct and indirect pressure and funding, as well as economic pressures, exacerbated by the economic crisis. Governments can and need to undertake renewed efforts in securing an environment for a vibrant media scene.

### Legal protection and working conditions of journalists

The Western Balkan states should strengthen the legal protection of journalists, and secure a social dialogue between journalists and their employers. Governments also should tackle the precarious working conditions of many journalists, who often do not get paid or are employed based only on short-term contracts, making them vulnerable to pressure and jeopardising their independence. Governments are encouraged to particularly ensure that media owners adhere to existing laws when it comes to employment and the working conditions of journalists. Furthermore, governments should promote a culture of de-politicisation of public prosecutors and other independent monitoring bodies and provide for their training. They should secure the effective implementation of hate speech laws, fight impunity and the lack of sanctions.

### Public broadcasters must be independent

The Western Balkan states, respectively politicians, parties or businesses, have to refrain from exercising pressure on public broadcasters and regulatory bodies through the direct or indirect influence on editors, journalists and managers that jeopardises the mission, function and mandate of public broadcasters or the regulatory bodies. The process of choosing board members of public broadcasters should be transparent, non-partisan and based on professional standards. This includes an appropriate number of civil

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<sup>3</sup> These recommendations are drawn from a workshop organized by BIRN, held in Sarajevo, 11 June 2015.



society members (civil society members of governing bodies should be appointed by civil society organisations which are not dominantly financed from public funds). Finally, sessions of board meetings of public broadcasters should be open to the public. While there is a provision for education and informative programming in the laws in public broadcasting, the law should also make it obligatory for public broadcasters to invest in investigative reporting.

### **State funding of media**

Governments should ensure full, long-term and reliable financial independence of public TV. Therefore, funds for media pluralism should be established with clear and transparent criteria for allocation of resources. The state, including local governments and state-owned companies, should adhere to a moratorium on advertisement until new mechanisms on funding and advertisement that also include civil society are established. State assistance should be based on public interests that, in turn, are based on criteria considering vulnerable groups and minorities, culture and investigative journalism and include transparent decision-making by an independent body.

### **Transparent media markets are indispensable**

The media cannot be established nor owned by a non-transparent ownership structure, including off-shore companies. The ownership structure of all media outlets should be permanently available to the public in an easy and transparent way. Western Balkan states should not allow a monopoly of market share of any distribution company or clusters of companies on the media market, especially regarding print media. They need to ensure full transparency of the work and operations of the advertising and media buying agencies in the media-related field.



### **Successful Creation of Jobs in the Whole Region – Developing Prosperity in a Common Labour Market<sup>4</sup>**

Economic growth, workplaces and prosperity are the main needs of citizens. Besides the weak national efforts, the regional cooperation in economic matters is also lagging behind, and cooperation in energy and infrastructure has only recently started. CEFTA did not have a strong impact on the economies. Another weakness of regional cooperation is that it has neglected social development issues, even though those have the potential to bring the most tangible benefits to individuals.

#### **More production as a balance to the growing consumption sector**

There is a need for more production and manufacturing to beef up the productive tissue of the region. In the framework of the European Economic and Social Model, each country should develop its own economic model based on the local comparative advantage, structures and competences. In this context, the complementarity in the value chain must be supported mainly through cross-border-cooperation in related areas of economy.

#### **Strong support of SME and developing local production capacities based on own competences**

The economic structure in the Western Balkans is based on nano, small and medium sized enterprises – many of them as family businesses. Big investments are vital but cannot replace the socio-economic contribution of the current structures. The countries have to define their respective needs, which includes looking for respective niches – with regard to traditional and present competences. In general, the focus should be on supporting high, added value production and manufacturing activities, and embedding them into the EU supply chain – and less in consumption activities.

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<sup>4</sup> These recommendations are drawn from a workshop held in Tirana, organized by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 7 May 2015.





### **Modernising and supporting the agricultural sector**

Employment in rural areas is strategic with regard to the “control of territory”. The agricultural sector should be developed through on-the-ground assistance and micro-credits targeting the rural population with training, micro-credits, advices, etc. This also could be a model for Nano and SME in other fields of economy. Rural development is necessary to maintain the control of the territory and to prevent massive migrations into the overcrowded cities that may become a source of instability.

### **Entrepreneurship and innovation as driving factors**

The promotion of entrepreneurship, creation of conditions for sustainable activities and promotion of an innovative economy sectors – especially bio-agriculture, tourism, IT, etc. – is relatively low due to the requested financial capital start up sums. It will be important to monitor and evaluate the two measures – entrepreneurship and innovation – and develop industrial policies accordingly.

### **Representative regional, national and local economic councils**

Civil society actors should be included in economic planning from the very beginning – like in a National Economic Council (including politics, employers, scientists, trade unions, civil society, local scientific community, etc.). This approach should also be applied on regional and local levels. These structures will have “competencies” in pre-defined functional economic areas.

### **Joint regional agreements to support regional exchange**

Free market competition amongst Western Balkan countries should be compensated by joint regional and cross-border planning for economic development – a process that should be completed by the production of harmonised regional data, not only on trade and investment but also on social factors. To promote native products and services in “functional neighbouring and cross-border areas”, specific policies and agreements should also be created.



### **Raising quality of life and consumers' protection**

The quality of products and services and consumers' protection are interdependent. Both are still missing in the Western Balkans. Defining minimum standards for the quality of products and services directly means a higher protection of consumers such as is required in the EU. The economic long-term planning should include the step-by-step substitution of low-cost production by raising quality as well as the professional competence of the workforce.

### **Developing an active labour market policy – fighting the grey labour market**

The countries have to develop an active labour market policy, actively involving all the actors as co-responsible partners. An efficient labour market policy requires an informed, active and permanent collaboration between employers and employees through joint decision making, joint development (training on the job, further vocational training and even occupational re-training), joint planning for crises, etc. The existing grey labour market has to be minimised step by step.



## Final remarks

### Modernisation of education and skills

The educational systems in the countries of the Western Balkans are obstructing the development of the countries' economies as well as the evolution of democracy. The increasing sense of helplessness and withdrawal among many younger citizens is the unfortunate result<sup>5</sup>. This generation needs to get back their hopes and believes in their countries and societies. All countries need a general modernisation of the education system from kindergarten to vocational training and university (labour market and process oriented). The proliferation of private universities and diplomas without adequate quality controls leads to a dead end for the economy as well as for the youth. Instead, there is a need for higher quality in teaching and education based on social and economic needs, as well as a new balance of high academic qualification and high non-academic professionalization by developing a modern vocational education and further vocational training.

### Investing in research and improving the EU fund absorption

The research and development capacities of the Western Balkans urgently require greater attention. This will allow pre-distribution policies. Additionally, a regional integration of research systems will lead the region to become more competitive and attractive for its citizens. All countries suffer more or less from a low absorption rate of EU funding. Specific actors - like native NGOs - are very low in the EU aid map. The EU should review its policy of distributing aid by adapting it to local conditions, working directly with the beneficiaries to increase the amount of aid that reaches them.

### Citizens participation as key for the European Economic and Social Model

The civil society is an important part of any democracy system, in particular for the European Economic and Social Model (EESM) in the European Union. This model also requires the respect towards, as well as the involvement and integration of, citizens and civil society. And - even more importantly - the EESM considers that economic and social development without the citizens' participation will fail.

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<sup>5</sup> See: "Youth in South Europe - Lost in Transition", <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/11504.pdf>