



# The EESC and the Western Balkans



*European Economic and Social Committee*

**External Relations (REX)**

## THE EESC AND THE WESTERN BALKANS: A TWO-LEVEL APPROACH

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has developed a dual approach, regional and bilateral, for its relations with civil society organizations (CSOs) of the Western Balkans. Both are linked by common global objectives, which are:

- to contribute to the consolidation of democracy and the future accession to the EU;
- to foster both civil and social dialogue:
  - by the development of a culture of dialogue between the authorities and the CSOs and among the CSOs themselves;
  - by the creation of transparent and efficient institutional frameworks for civil and social dialogue;
  - by promoting the setting-up of adequate legal environments for the activities of the CSOs;
- to strengthen civil society networks;
- to increase exchange of experiences and best practices.

## A Regional Approach

The Western Balkans Contact Group – a permanent internal body established by the EESC in 2004 – is the main instrument for coordinating the EESC's activities in this regard. The role of the Contact Group is also to monitor the changes in the political, economic and social situation in the Western Balkan countries and in EU-Western Balkans relations. Furthermore, the Contact Group promotes cooperation between the EESC and Western Balkans civil society organizations.



3<sup>rd</sup> Western Balkans Civil Society Forum  
Brussels, 2010

## The Western Balkans Civil Society Forum

The Forum is part of the work of the Contact Group. Organized every two years since 2006, it provides an opportunity to exchange views on the current situation of civil society in the region, its needs and its future development. It brings together participants from Western Balkans countries, members of the EESC, representatives of national Economic and Social Councils and similar institutions, international socio-professional organizations (employers, trade unions, farmers, consumers), NGOs, representatives of EU institutions and diplomats. The participants adopt conclusions addressed to national authorities and European institutions.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Forum, organised in May 2010 in Brussels, enabled the participants to discuss issues such as economic and social rights and the role of civil society organisations in the future Treaty establishing a Transport Community. Among the various recommendations adopted by the participants, one could underline the proposal to grant the Western Balkans countries observer status at the European Agency for Fundamental Rights, which would ultimately support the work carried out by civil society organisations in the region.

## A Bilateral Approach

The EESC also works on a bilateral basis through the elaboration of opinions and the establishment of Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs).



Cveto Stantič  
President of the Western  
Balkans Contact Group  
(2010-2013)

"Under my chairmanship, we will voice the concerns of civil society organisations of the Western Balkan countries in the fields of rural development and employment policies."

Cveto Stantič



Pirkko Raunemaa  
Co-president of the EU-The former Yugoslav  
Republic of Macedonia Civil Society Joint  
Consultative Committee



Christoph Lechner  
Co-president of  
the EU-Croatia Joint  
Consultative Committee

## Opinions

As an advisory body to the EU institutions, one of the core functions of the EESC is to draft opinions on several EU policies. In 2007, the EESC started a series of opinions dealing with the situation of civil society in each country of the region.

- *Croatia on the road to accession* (2007)
- *Relations between the European Union and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: the role of civil society* (2008)
- *EU-Serbia relations: the role of civil society* (2008)
- *The role of civil society in EU pre-accession aid programmes in the Republic of Albania* (2008)
- *EU-Bosnia and Herzegovina relations: the role of civil society* (2009)
- *The role of civil society in EU-Montenegro relations* (2010)

In order to prepare each opinion, a delegation of EESC members went to the country concerned to meet the various stakeholders and to involve them in the elaboration of the opinion.

## The Joint Consultative Committees

The EESC is also involved in the enlargement process of the EU through the establishment of Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs). They complement the EU institutional framework related to each Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) signed between the EU and a country of the region and ratified. It allows civil society organisations from both EU and national sides to monitor the country's path towards EU accession once it has started its accession negotiations. It is a platform of dialogue for civil society representatives to discuss issues of common interest. It also prepares civil society representatives to join the EESC.

The EU-Croatia JCC and the EU-The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia JCC have met twice a year since they started their activities.

An EU-Montenegro JCC and an EU-Serbia JCC could be established in the near future, provided the necessary conditions are fulfilled.

## Inter-institutional Cooperation

In order to have a comprehensive approach towards the region, the EESC, via the Contact Group, is maintaining a strong relationship with EU institutions and agencies (European Commission, European Parliament, Council of the EU, Committee of the Regions,

the European Training Foundation) as well as with active international organizations (International Labour Organisation, OSCE, Regional Cooperation Council) in the Western Balkans.

EU institutions can request the EESC to draft an exploratory opinion on a precise topic, to contribute to the definition of EU policies or programmes. Recently, the European Commission requested the EESC to draft the opinion on "The role of civil society in EU-Montenegro relations" adopted in April 2010.

Furthermore, the cooperation with the Delegations of the European Union in the countries of the region proved to be instrumental in promoting and developing dialogue with civil society organisations.

## Promotion of consultative processes

The EESC promotes and supports the development of Economic and Social Councils or similar institutions in the countries of the region.

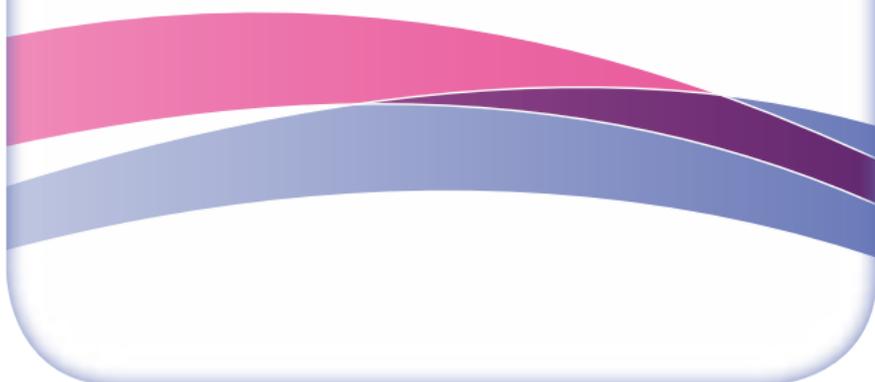
The EESC consistently advocates for the strengthening of social dialogue and civil dialogue, either in its opinions, or through the participation of its members in conferences and events.

This priority was also confirmed in the conclusions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Western Balkans Civil Society Forum.

## Regular contacts

Members of the EESC participate in various conferences or events dealing with the Western Balkans organised in Brussels or in the region.

They also meet representatives of civil society organisations within the context of study visits organised in Brussels or of programmes managed by EU institutions such as the EU Visitors Programme or the Civil Society Facility.





*European Economic and Social Committee*

Visits and Publications Unit  
Tel. +32 25469604 • Fax +32 25469926  
Rue Belliard/Belliardstraat 99  
1040 Bruxelles/Brussel  
**BELGIQUE/BELGIË**

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[www.eesc.europa.eu](http://www.eesc.europa.eu)

For further information, please contact:  
EESC External Relations Unit  
[Balkans@eesc.europa.eu](mailto:Balkans@eesc.europa.eu)  
Tel. +32 25469969

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