

The Western Balkans Civil Society Forum demands a renewed impetus for the EU's enlargement policy



The 7th edition of the Western Balkans Civil Society Forum, which took place in Tirana on 16 and 17 April, concluded with a call for the next Commission to maintain the Western Balkans enlargement policy as one of its priorities in the interest of both the region and of the EU.

More than 180 representatives of civil society organisations from the Western Balkans and the EU took part in the event, organised by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) with the support of the European Commission and the Regional Cooperation Council.

Luca Jahier, President of the EESC, observed in his opening speech that *the enlargement, and in particular the spread of the EU's democratic values and legal standards to the Western Balkans region, is in the interest of both our partners from the region and of the EU.*

Deputy Minister **Sokol Dedja** added that *regional cooperation is not only intergovernmental cooperation, but also between societies* and praised the EESC for the important role it plays in increasing public support for EU

enlargement.

Director **Angelina Eichhorst** (European External Action Service) emphasised that *CSOs are key to fostering stronger commitment from political leaders and societies towards a change in political culture, towards more democracy, transparency and the rule of law, towards more sustainable economies.*

According to Ms **Majlinda Bregu**, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, *citizens of the Western Balkans believe that civil society is the most functional body that can hold the governments accountable.*

Freedom of expression, trade and youth

One of the major concerns expressed in the Forum was the **shrinking space for civil society** in a number of countries in the region. Participants emphasised in the final declaration that “freedom of expression and free media are prerequisites for establishing solid democracies” and condemned the attacks on civil society organisations (CSO) by representatives of governments and government-funded media. It was also agreed that national Economic and Social Councils should play an important role in the implementation of economic programmes. Collective bargaining, as a key mechanism for creating a fair and sustainable wage system and combating the gender pay gap, was strongly supported.

Trade issues were also discussed by the participants, who insisted on the need for further integration of regional economies by lifting all unjustified barriers imposed on imports of goods and services and attracting private investments through a favourable and more predictable business environment.

Regarding youth-related policies, the final declaration encouraged the authorities of the Western Balkans partners to invest “considerably” in quality as a way to reduce youth unemployment, but also to ensure that young people are better integrated in the Western Balkans, as this was the only way to “mitigate their tendency to emigrate”.