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Relations between the EU and the Western Balkans – Recommendations of the EESC



European Economic and Social Committee

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INTRODUCTION

The EU Neighbourhood, especially the candidates and potential candidates for EU accession, is at the very top of the priority list for the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) with regard to external relations.

In order to contribute effectively to the EU accession negotiations, the EESC's policy has been to establish Civil Society Joint Consultative Committees only after the first chapters of negotiations have been opened. The EESC's Western Balkans Follow-up Committee continued the practice of organizing regular study or follow-up visits to the countries with which no Joint Consultative Committee has yet been established, in order to maintain contacts with local organizations.

In the reporting period the EESC issued five opinions on Western Balkans and held:

- *two Western Balkans Civil Society Forums (in Belgrade on 2-3 June 2015 and in Sarajevo on 10-11 July 2017);*
- *ten meetings of the Western Balkans Follow-up Committee, including two outside of Brussels, in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Tirana (Albania);*
- *fourteen meetings of Joint Consultative Committees deriving from the Stabilisation and Association Agreements: seven with Montenegro (three in Montenegro and four in Brussels) and seven with Serbia (four in Serbia and three in Brussels);*
- *one High Level Conference on economic and social cohesion in the Western Balkans in Sofia (Bulgaria) on 15 May 2018; and*
- *two fact-finding missions to North Macedonia (Skopje, Kumanovo and Tetovo).*

The EESC decided to compile in a single document its activities in the region since the 5th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum – a flagship EESC event in the Western Balkans that took place in Belgrade on 2-3 June 2015. In this compendium we intended to collect, in a concise and reader-friendly format, the observations and recommendations that the EESC has made in its opinions on the Western Balkans, and at its joint meetings with the civil society partners in the region, regional forums, conferences and bilateral missions in the region.

This document is divided into topics identified, together with our partners from civil society organisations (CSOs) in the region, as important and common to the Western Balkans. They are grouped into five areas: enlargement; freedoms and rights; social and economic cohesion; a look into the needs of specific groups; and tools for sustainable future. In cases where we dealt with specific topics related to a single candidate or potential candidate countries, these examples are clearly stated in the document.

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1. ENLARGEMENT

The EU's support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans is unequivocal. A clear prospect of accession is essential for the stability of the region. Enlargement should remain one of the EU's priorities, despite the multitude of challenges it is currently facing. The accession process should be pursued further with both vigour and rigour as one of the EU's top priorities, under the clear and stringent conditions that are the basis of all enlargement processes – nothing more, and nothing less.

Particular emphasis is given to the fundamentals in the accession process and the need for enlargement countries to prioritise reforms in the areas of rule of law, fundamental rights, functioning of democratic institutions (including election system reform and public administration reform), economic development and strengthening of competitiveness.

Greater consistency is needed to ensure that both the EU institutions and the governments concerned adopt a transparent and inclusive approach throughout the accession process, across all policy areas and in all candidate and potential candidate countries.

Western Balkans partners should organise their structure for negotiating accession-related talks with the EU in an inclusive and transparent way, while effectively involving the government and the opposition as well as civil society organisations.

Civil society engagement in the accession process consists of:

1. direct involvement in the actual negotiations (*i.e. screening, preparation of national positions, overseeing progress*);
2. social and civil dialogue related to policy formulation and legislative harmonisation with the acquis;
3. participation in the programming of pre-accession funding;
4. independent monitoring of progress and the social effects of the reform processes.

Within the Western Balkans, there is a desire and readiness for reforms that would entail integration into the EU, but it has also been noted that success remains dependent on the extent to which state institutions are able to effectively implement and enforce such reforms, as well as on the degree of ownership of the process achieved by civil society organisations and the population in general.

Governments in the region should carry out regulatory impact assessments (RIA) when preparing national negotiation positions and legal harmonisation in order to identify adjustment risks. It is important to engage non-state players, including the business community, trade unions and representatives of affected social groups, when carrying out RIAs.

A specific roadmap for EU accession negotiations with a precise timeline and tangible commitments for each country of the Western Balkans could motivate these countries to implement necessary reforms faster.

It would be advisable for all countries in the region to set up national councils for European integration, or other similar bodies that would bring high-level political authorities and key civil society organisations together on a regular basis, with a view to making the process towards EU integration more transparent and publicising it more widely.

National parliaments should play a proactive, deliberative and supervisory role in the accession process in a timely and strategic manner.

The efforts of the offices of the Chief Negotiator to open consultations with civil society representatives are commendable, bearing in mind the complexity of the negotiation process as well as the public administration's lack of administrative capacity. These consultations should be genuine and not limited to *pro forma* participation of CSOs in working groups.

It will be essential to strengthen the role of civil society Joint Consultative Committees. JCCs should attempt to fill "empty niches" that are not covered by other bodies in the negotiation process and focus on a selected number of areas.

The EESC has asked governments in the Western Balkans region to support the social partners and other civil society organisations on an equal footing, and involve them closely in their national strategies, policies towards EU accession and negotiation structures, and in the programming and implementation of EU-funded projects. The engagement of non-state actors, including the business community, trade unions and representatives of the social groups concerned, is essential.

EU institutions and EU Member States are invited to regularly involve representatives from the countries of the Western Balkans in EU summits, as proof that the EU considers this region to be part of its future, and to lead an informed debate on the political, economic and social impact of enlargement policy.

After the political tensions unravelled in the Republic of North Macedonia back in 2014, the EESC undertook an exploratory mission to Skopje and Kumanovo in July 2015, demonstrating its commitment, along with other EU institutions, to helping to resolve the crisis in this EU candidate country. We condemned the violence in the city of Kumanovo, which demonstrated how fragile stability in the Western Balkans is and how necessary it is to provide for a clear accession perspective for the region.

2. FREEDOMS AND RIGHTS

Freedom of expression and media

Freedom of expression, free media and autonomy of journalists are fundamental prerequisites for establishing solid democracies and allowing a vibrant civil society to develop. Civil society must be vocal and take the lead in denouncing the negative developments in the region in relation to freedom of expression, such as political pressure on the media.

Serious concerns exist in view of the considerable backsliding in several countries in the region in respect of freedom of association, of assembly and of expression and independence of the media.

The independence of public service broadcasters should be strengthened, and non-transparent financial dependencies and ownership of media outlets, the overwhelming share of state aid and/or state advertising in media funding, and its arbitrary distribution, should be stopped.

The important role media play in conflict prevention and resolution needs to be emphasised, as public broadcasters should lead the way in promoting tolerance, understanding and mutual respect and in constructively contributing to peace in society.

The public authorities should strive to ensure effective, transparent and non-discriminatory funding of the media, including in terms of political bias. The independence of public media services should be improved by establishing independent mechanisms for financing and for electing management boards and governing bodies.

Poor social protection and working conditions for journalists represent a direct form of pressure that fuels the spread of self-censorship, hinders independent, quality journalism and favours "tabloidisation" instead. Journalists' unions and labour laws are crucial for alleviating these issues. National authorities and EU institutions should strengthen the capacities of associations and trade unions of professional journalists, as well as self-regulatory bodies.

Improved media freedom could, among other things, help raise awareness of gender-equality matters and advocate for a safer media environment in which gender stereotypes can be deconstructed through public debate and where women are not targeted by sexism, hate speech or online smear campaigns.

Partners in the region are invited to improve rules on freedom of access to information and their practical implementation, to adopt and implement laws on whistle blowing and to make the system of whistle-blower protection more effective in practice.

*The EU-Serbia Civil Society JCC has expressed their concerns about the situation in **Serbia** regarding freedom of expression, of association and of the media and has called upon the Serbian authorities to implement all necessary measures to improve this situation, especially regarding the repeated attacks on journalists, civil society organisations and grassroots activists. The prosecution of those who are responsible for threats, violence and harassment of journalists should be fully implemented.*

The Serbian authorities are urged to ensure the independence of the Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media (REM) in order to prevent economic and political pressure on the regulator. It was recommended that the role of the Press Council, as a self-regulatory body, should be strengthened in order to improve compliance with the Code of Journalists.

*The EU-Montenegro Civil Society JCC has reiterated its concerns relating to media freedom in **Montenegro**, especially when it comes to instances of political interference in the work of national public broadcaster RTCG. The importance of guaranteeing the independence of the Agency for Electronic Media (AEM), particularly when it comes to appointing the members of its governing bodies, needs to be stressed. The lack of progress in dealing with both old and recent cases of violence against journalists, such as the shooting of Vijesti journalist Olivera Lakić, needs to be underlined.*

Through the Sofia Conference organised by the EESC, the heads of state at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia were called upon to provide more direct public support for independent media.

Justice, Freedom & Security, with a focus on migration

Cultural, religious and minority rights must be protected, and every effort must be made to preserve these attributes. Equal treatment and anti-discrimination policies are the pillars of European policy, including policies relating to the integration of third-country nationals.

The EU and the Western Balkans partners share many security challenges that require coordinated individual and collective action. The ability to address such challenges effectively, in addition to effective cooperation in stemming illegal migration flows, has demonstrated its value and can be developed further.

It is important to recognise the substantial efforts and resources that certain countries in the region have invested into addressing the refugee crises and into giving the necessary assistance and shelter to thousands of refugees passing through and/or remaining on their territory, in accordance with the Geneva Convention.

Regional cooperation between CSOs specialising in migrants and refugees is important, in order to exchange best practices in their specific areas of expertise and to combat xenophobia. CSOs from the Western Balkans should be invited to participate in debates on refugees and migration held at EU level.

Political authorities are encouraged to involve CSOs, including social partners, in the design of sustainable long-term integration policies, covering skills screening and recognition, education and training, including civic education, language courses and access to the labour market, to be applied as soon as possible if a positive outcome to the asylum procedure is to be expected.

In view of the rising intolerance, racism and xenophobia towards migrants and refugees in Europe, a different narrative should be adopted about migration, where it is seen as a normal social and economic phenomenon, and efforts should be facilitated to educate society on the issue and thereby counter hate-based narratives.

The EESC has emphasised the Western Balkans region's specific issue with depopulation as a result of intra-regional migration and emigration, especially of young people, towards the EU, which has a significant impact on the demography and society of these countries and thus on their socio-economic landscape and prospects.

*Well-thought-out and comprehensive coordination between migration and development is needed, in order to create situations that are beneficial for all those involved. In this context, the fact that **Montenegro** has adopted the UN's Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration is welcomed. Montenegrin efforts are required, including close cooperation with its neighbours, in terms of preventive action in case of a massive inflow of irregular migrants, and measures to strengthen accommodation capacities for migrants and asylum seekers.*

Montenegrin national and local authorities should devise action plans and provide for sufficient funding to deliver services and support to migrants and asylum-seekers. It is necessary to work closely with CSOs specialised in this field, whose role needs to be legally defined and their capacity strengthened. Montenegrin authorities should pay special attention to vulnerable persons in transit, especially unaccompanied minors.

*The EU-Serbia JCC has recognised the substantial efforts and resources that **Serbia's** authorities have invested into addressing the refugee crises and into giving the necessary assistance and shelter to thousands of refugees passing through and/or staying on its territory. Securing borders must not mean shutting out those who need protection for humanitarian reasons, in accordance with the Geneva Convention. Refugees need safe, regular routes to come to the EU, in order to avoid further deaths, human rights violations and exposure to smuggling and trafficking.*

A dialogue has to be opened between affected EU Member States and the Serbian authorities on relevant issues, such as access to social and economic rights, related to returnees under readmission agreements, many of whom belong to the Roma minority in Serbia.

Consumer and health protection

The importance of capacity building for civil society organisations active in the area of consumer protection in the Western Balkans needs to be stressed, for them to be able to efficiently contribute to the protection of consumers.

Western Balkans governments are asked to genuinely involve CSOs in the decision-making process on public health. It is not enough to periodically invite them to hearings; their comments on new legislative and policy proposals also need to be taken into consideration. The communication strategy with regard to citizens should be developed, in order to inform them of patients' rights and the work of the protector of patients' rights.

Healthcare in the Western Balkans has been recognised as an area that is particularly vulnerable to corruption. Civil society oversight should be ensured in this regard. With this in mind, a body of representatives of independent CSOs and experts could be formed within the Anti-Corruption Agency in order to receive and investigate anonymous reports of corruption in public healthcare. In addition, the activities of the protector of patients' rights should be better and more clearly defined.

Administrative capacity in the area of public health needs to be strengthened in order to ensure effective implementation of EU legislation. Capacity building with regard to healthcare needs to continue with financial support from EU pre-accession funds. This process should include modernising equipment, building administrative capacity via training provided to the healthcare workforce, and constructing a sustainable foundation for the healthcare workforce with greater numbers of appropriate specialists, further development of the e-Health agenda and the health information system, and better collection of public health statistical data.

Montenegro has made significant progress in aligning with the EU acquis and the related standards and quality of services. However, and keeping track of such progress, with regard to consumer's protection, further efforts are needed to complete this process, since it will not be finished until the legislation is implemented effectively and systematically.

The Montenegrin government must first and foremost give fresh impetus to its consumer protection strategy, on the basis of the active informed consumer model. The government is asked to adopt a new consumer protection law in order to bring it into line with the highest European standards in the areas of sustainable development and the circular economy, to establish mechanisms for structured dialogue with organised civil society in order to discuss the processes of aligning with and implementing the EU acquis, and to step up campaigns and investment in the areas of education and information, starting at primary and secondary school level.

It should also improve the implementation of the Law on Limiting the Use of Tobacco Products, especially as regards inspection and supervision, and to effectively address harm associated with alcohol. The implementation of the National Programme for Early Detection of Cancer should be substantially enhanced, in such a way that cancer screening programmes cover all municipalities in Montenegro and systematically cover breast, colorectal and cervical cancer.

Free movement of goods and workers and the right of establishment and freedom to provide services

Free movement of goods, which has helped build the internal market from which European citizens and businesses are now benefiting, is of paramount importance. Free movement of goods is not an

absolute value and certain overriding political aims that serve important purposes, such as consumer rights, protection of the environment or human health, may require restrictions.

Free movement of workers continues to encounter the greatest obstacles in practice in the EU. However, the exercise of the free movement of workers, without obstacles or discrimination, will help to safeguard fundamental rights and will improve the EU's competitiveness, business productivity and the quality of employment for workers.

Additional measures should be adopted at EU level to make easily understandable information on labour and social law available to mobile workers in their respective national languages. Additionally, relevant advice facilities should work closely with the social partners while ensuring that mobile workers are informed about social and legal conditions in their host countries before they leave their countries of origin.

The services package published by the Commission on 10 January 2017 contains various new legislative proposals (for a services e-card, a services notification procedure, and a proportionality test before adoption of new regulation of professions) intended to make the EU's internal market more effective. Western Balkans authorities, as well as relevant CSOs, should closely follow developments in the adoption of this package of legislation. Consultation of the social partners and consumer protection organisations should also be provided for so as to ensure full compliance with workers' and consumers' rights.

Montenegro should start to prepare in good time for its participation in the coordination of social security systems, as well as for the use of the European Health Insurance Card. Participation in these complex processes calls for substantial administrative capacities at national and local level, and the Montenegrin government needs to invest enough resources to employ and train staff well in advance of EU accession.

The intention of the Montenegrin government to adopt the Law on protection of the citizens of Montenegro that work abroad is welcome. When drafting such a law, the Montenegrin authorities should take into consideration experience and best practices from the EU Member States. Nevertheless, the potential danger of the "brain-drain" phenomenon needs to be addressed.

Authorities are encouraged to step up activities relating to the preparation of the Point of Single Contact regulation, which would establish a single contact point for services in order to provide easier, faster and more efficient information on service provision and establishment. It is necessary to complete the changes to the legal framework that would abolish citizenship requirements for access and exercising the freedom to provide services.

The EU-Montenegro JCC has welcomed the Montenegrin government's intention to draw up a study on the impact of free movement of workers between Montenegro and Member States of the EU, financed by the EU Integration Facility, and has called for the social partners and other CSOs to be involved in drafting it.

3. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC COHESION

The state of social dialogue

Social dialogue is key for the economic and social development of the Western Balkans and the EU. The EESC has called for early involvement of social partners in the activities of drafting legislation and

for regular consultations with Social and Economic Councils with regard to new legislative proposals. It has also called on the governments in the region to comply with and guarantee compliance with labour laws, and to improve tripartite social dialogue.

Strengthening the social partners' capacity to participate actively in social dialogue should be a key priority for EU assistance programs. The EU institutions and the governments from the region are invited to provide for the strengthening of the overall capacities of the social partners. Governments in the region are requested to support social partners and other civil society organisations on an equal footing and to involve them closely in their national strategies towards EU accession and negotiation structures, as well as in EU-funded programmes.

More funds, including organisational grants, are to be allocated to building the capacities of social partners and CSOs so that they can effectively participate in these processes. Improvements in the quality and content of social dialogue in candidate and potential candidate countries should be encouraged.

The EESC has on numerous occasions stressed the importance of social dialogue and invited the authorities from the Western Balkans, including at local level, to increase collaboration with the social partners and other CSOs operating in the area of social policy, employment and economic policies. Social partners should be consulted, more systematically and in a timely matter, on all relevant legislative proposals and at all stages when developing strategic documents in the area of social policy and employment.

It is important to ratify all ILO labour conventions, especially the eight core ILO labour conventions, and to implement them effectively, and progressing in strengthening labour and trade union rights.

*The level of tripartite social dialogue in **Montenegro** is viewed in a positive light, and considered to be a good example for the region. Nevertheless, the status and the competencies of the Social Council requires further strengthening. There is a low level of bipartite social dialogue in the areas of trade, catering and banking activities. The authorities need to be reminded of the Recommendation on the violation of labour and trade union rights in the Podgorica Aluminium Plant by the ILO Committee on the Application of Standards.*

*The EESC underlines the importance of social dialogue in **Albania** and calls upon all stakeholders to make the best use of the existing institutions, especially the National Labour Council (NLC). The Albanian government should further promote the NLC and consult it more systematically on all policies in which employers and workers have a legitimate interest. Social dialogue should be further encouraged at regional and local level. Social dialogue should become regular and structural in nature and not ad hoc, and it should also be more effective and results-driven. Much more should be invested by the Albanian government in promoting social dialogue, educating workers about their rights and making sure that employers, especially in the private sector, effectively respect the rights of workers.*

*The social partners in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** need to overcome their differences by developing an active dialogue between each other, as well as with the public authorities, in order not only to be critical, but also to propose concrete solutions to the difficult economic and social situation the country is facing. The public authorities in the country, at all levels, are invited to make a strong effort in cooperating with social partners and other CSOs and, by building an atmosphere of trust and cooperation, include them in all stages of policy making, particularly in the implementation of measures comprised in the Reform Agenda for BiH (2015-2018).*

In North Macedonia the EESC noted the deterioration of the social dialogue and the functioning of the Economic and Social Council (ESC) towards the end of 2017. The government's efforts to promote transparency and inclusiveness in the ESC's work should go hand in hand with respect for the current provisions in the Labour Law, as well as in its Rules of Procedure. A satisfactory solution needs to be found to the current and future functioning of the ESC in a constructive dialogue with the representative social partners, in order to avoid further tensions and a possible boycott of the ESC meetings by one or more of the parties.

Economic and social cohesion in the Western Balkans

Through the Western Balkans Civil Society Conference organised by the EESC in Sofia, the heads of states at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia were called upon to set out their clear commitment to more consistent and direct support for civil society organisations at all levels.

The EESC has noted that the EU accession process remains a key motivation for reforms in the countries of the Western Balkans. It is worth highlighting the lack of attention given to the economic and social effects of the reforms carried out, considering the major differences in people's economic and social security between EU Member States and candidates for membership. Therefore, social, economic and territorial cohesion should be assessed when evaluating the fulfilment of EU membership criteria.

Candidate countries in the Western Balkans region need stronger reform incentives. In particular, it is necessary to encourage closer regional cooperation in order to facilitate the fulfilment of the criteria for EU membership.

The EU needs to strengthen and intensify its engagement at all levels to support the region's political, economic and social transformation, including through increased assistance based on tangible progress in the rule of law, as well as in socio-economic reforms, by the Western Balkans partners.

The EESC proposes that the EU institutions consider having a functioning social and civil dialogue at national level as one of the criteria for EU membership.

The role of civil society in the fight against corruption and respect for the rule of law

Strengthening the rule of law is a key challenge for most of the countries in the enlargement process, in particular in terms of improving the functioning and independence of the judiciary and fighting corruption and organised crime. Corrupt practices not only negatively affect the business and investment climate, but also directly affect citizens when accessing certain public services such as education and health services.

The actions set out in the anticorruption strategies and in corresponding action plans should be implemented within the deadlines set. An effective and functioning monitoring mechanism with the involvement of civil society should allow regular and careful monitoring of the implementation results.

All efforts to open consultations with civil society representatives, especially with regard to the rule of law, are welcome, bearing in mind the complexity of the negotiation process as well as the lack of administrative capacity of the public administrations. These consultations should be genuine and not limited to pro forma participation of CSOs in working groups.

Political authorities should work hand in hand with civil society organisations when introducing reforms and implementing legislation on key issues such as handling high-level corruption cases, better supervision of public procurement procedures and improving the legal framework for the financing of political parties.

The EESC calls for the adoption and implementation of laws on whistle-blowing and for steps to make the system of whistle-blower protection more effective in practice. It has also called for public awareness of the possibilities for reporting corruption cases to be raised.

Entrepreneurship promotion can be successfully achieved only by ensuring respect for the rule of law and by effectively addressing corruption (both at local and national level), organised crime and the informal economy.

In this context, the role of investigative journalism is pivotal in the fight against corruption.

The authorities in the countries of the region are advised to establish and support the functioning of strong and independent regulatory institutions, particularly in the areas of the fight against corruption, freedom of access to information, privacy protection, auditing and elections. Ombudsmen can make a decisive contribution, complementing the work of civil society organisations working on fundamental rights, in particular in the protection of minorities.

*The importance should be stressed of independent regulatory bodies in **Serbia**, including the Ombudsman and the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, in ensuring oversight and accountability of the executive. The Serbian authorities are encouraged to provide the independent regulatory bodies with full political, administrative and financial support for their work and to safeguard their right to independent work and follow-up of their findings and recommendations.*

Corruption in Serbia continues to prevail in many areas, and the investigation and prosecution of cases of corruption and organised crime need to be stepped up. The law enforcement authorities need to develop a more proactive attitude to investigating allegations of corruption, especially high-profile cases and cases involving public officials.

Education and its impact on the labour market

The EESC stresses the need to further strengthen competitiveness and to enhance structural reforms in all six Western Balkan countries, in order to reinforce the labour market and slow down emigration. On the other hand, the EESC has also expressed its conviction that the role of education is very important in order to overcome the disputes of the past and enhance democratic values. It has welcomed initiatives by state educational and cultural institutions, academia and civil society organisations on reconciliation, good neighbourhood relations, and a critical approach to the past.

The role of education in all Western Balkan countries, including equal access to education systems, is crucial in terms of promoting European values, cultivating tolerance towards minorities, fighting prejudices, and strengthening social cohesion.

In view of the alarmingly high youth unemployment rates, it is recommended that the EU Youth Guarantee be extended to the Western-Balkans, in cooperation with the social partners in the region.

The "social cohesion agenda" must remedy skills gaps and skills mismatches by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of education systems. Enhanced financial support for vocational education programmes would help address the skills mismatch in the labour market and reduce the high levels of unemployment.

In order to tackle labour market challenges, national governments, representatives of the business community and trade unions should continue adapting the education system to the principles of dual education. Furthermore, formal education should be improved at all levels in order to foster development of entrepreneurial skills and to generate spin-offs, in particular knowledge-based ones. Adult education and training with active involvement of relevant stakeholders: business associations, trade unions and other CSOs, needs to be further supported.

Western Balkans authorities should continue developing National Qualification Frameworks in line with the European Qualification Framework, as it represents a key tool for the recognition of qualifications and skills acquired formally or informally, and for encouraging the territorial and professional mobility of workers. This would eventually lead to a better linkage between the education system and the labour market and improve the employability of workers.

Western Balkans authorities are advised to develop and implement training programmes for low-skilled workers with no elementary education or with only elementary education in order to enable them, with the right combination of tailor-made curricula, appropriate teaching methods and financial assistance, to obtain their first professional qualification, improve their employability and lift them out of low paid jobs and poverty.

EU and national authorities should cooperate more on dismantling education stereotypes so as to ensure that girls and women can access affordable and quality education throughout their lives, equipping them with relevant skills and facilitating their careers and access to quality jobs in the labour market.

*In order to tackle labour market challenges, the EU-Serbia Civil Society JCC encouraged **Serbia** to continue with the development and modernisation of its education system. This process should be in line with European values and the principles of equality, non-discrimination and active citizenship and it should closely follow the initiatives being undertaken at EU level, such as the New Skills Agenda for Europe, which focuses on digital skills and better coordination of the education system and labour market needs. The JCC pointed out that modern curricula should foster the development of entrepreneurial skills and teach students the principles of social entrepreneurship and active citizenship.*

Social policy and employment, with a special focus on the European Pillar of Social Rights

Public authorities from the region are encouraged to include the European Pillar of Social Rights in the next cycle of the Economic Reform Programme and the Employment and Social Policy Reform Programme. In addition, the authorities, in cooperation with the social partners and other CSOs, are invited to perform social impact assessments of all structural reforms, and to link these assessments to the priorities determined in the Employment and Social Policy Reform Programme.

The EU and Western Balkan partners should pay more attention to the quality of life and social security of their citizens. It is also suggested that consideration should be given to the possibility of applying the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights when assessing the fulfilment of conditions for EU membership.

When designing employment and social inclusion measures, the authorities from the region could make use of the Employment Guidelines proposed by the European Commission that align the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights with the commitment to enhancing the EU's competitiveness through investment, job creation and social cohesion. The creation of sustainable and good quality jobs should become one of the objectives of the Economic Reform Programme and structural reforms should be designed to achieve this goal.

*The EU-Montenegro JCC invited the Commission to explore how to integrate the European Pillar of Social Rights into the EU's accession negotiations with **Montenegro**, making sure to strengthen the existing parts of the process such as Economic Reform Programmes. It also invited the Montenegrin authorities to study the various proposals incorporated into the European Pillar of Social Rights and to take them into consideration when drawing up structural reforms.*

Inequalities in the areas of social policy and employment

The EESC invites the governments from the region to pay special attention to workers at the lower end of the wage spectrum, and to substantially increase the inclusion of unemployed people in active labour market measures, in particular the most vulnerable groups such as women, Roma and people with disabilities.

The high level of poverty in the Western Balkans is particularly elevated in rural areas, and the EESC encourages the authorities to address regional disparities in their countries. Family benefits need to be better targeted in order to improve their efficiency and children, families in a vulnerable situation and large families need to be effectively protected from poverty.

The importance of collective bargaining needs to be stressed as a key mechanism for creating a fair and sustainable wage system and combating the gender pay gap, as well as vertical and sectoral segregation on the labour market. Governments from the region need to ensure an environment which will stimulate the development of collective bargaining.

The EU and the Western Balkans are facing shared challenges regarding gender inequality: widespread domestic violence, limited labour market opportunities and unequal access to participation in high-level politics (despite existing targeted objectives).

Informal economic activity is a major problem in the region, reducing access to social benefits, health care and pensions. Governments from the region, in coordination with the social partners, are invited to boost efforts to tackle the informal economy and to pay special attention to strengthening administrative capacities, particularly when it comes to the labour inspection system.

***Serbia** has one of the highest Gini coefficients and at-risk-of-poverty rates in Europe (according to Eurostat's Survey on Income and Living Conditions – SILC). A major part of the reason for such high levels of inequality is that the tax and benefit systems are highly regressive. Serbian authorities should comprehensively restructure the tax system towards a progressive tax system based predominantly on direct taxes, in order to ensure an adequate and better targeted financing of active social policies and social protection. This should be done by taking into account the concrete effects these measures will have on reducing material deprivation, poverty and income inequalities.*

The EU-Serbia JCC invited the Serbian government to consider introducing a minimum income allowing a decent life, accompanied by appropriate vocational integration and reintegration initiatives.

Enterprise and industrial policy, with a focus on promoting entrepreneurship

It is important to create a favourable business environment in order to foster entrepreneurship and business creation, and to help SMEs grow, thus enabling economic diversification and further reduction in unemployment. Furthermore, entrepreneurship promotion can be successfully achieved only by ensuring respect for the rule of law and by effectively addressing corruption (both at local and national level), organised crime and the informal economy.

The comprehensive evaluation mechanisms need to be strengthened, especially the adoption of the SME Development Strategy, to allow for an analytical assessment of the implemented policy measures and evidence-based adjustments. In order to improve the business environment, it is suggested that the SME test be made an obligatory element of the regulatory impact assessments, to be conducted in close cooperation with the SME community.

A framework could be set up to make it easier to deal with administrative formalities related to starting up and running businesses electronically, taking into account best practices in implementation of the Points of Single Contact at national level, and the EU-level discussions on their development.

The issue of para-fiscal charges is burdensome to SMEs; a framework should be provided which would make these charges transparent, stable and proportionate to the purpose they serve.

It is essential that cooperation is in place between the institutions and organisations providing support to SMEs on the foreign markets in order to streamline and leverage up their activities. The decision-makers and the SME community, both in the Western Balkans and in the EU, need to step up their cooperation in order to make better use of available instruments, such as those provided by COSME and Horizon 2020.

The importance of industrial policy needs to be recognised, building on the competitive advantages of the economy of Western Balkans countries to promote economic development based on high value-added outputs, in particular those driven by technology and innovation.

The authorities are encouraged to make sure that all relevant legislation and policies related to various industries have passed necessary due diligence tests and are adequately and rigorously assessed against threats to society, such as climate change. Additionally, they should be in line with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Small and medium-sized enterprises, which make up the majority of businesses, could become the engines of economic growth in all six Western Balkan countries. In order for this to be achieved, a reduction in bureaucracy, a more transparent public administration, fighting corruption and a fully independent judiciary are necessary within the region.

The EU-Serbia JCC has strongly supported cooperation between the SME community, social partners, and the Serbian authorities, in particular through platforms such as the SME Forum, the SME Council and the Social and Economic Council and has called for their greater use in shaping regulation and policies.

Social economy and social enterprises

The Western Balkans authorities are invited to adopt the Law on the Social Economy as a matter of priority, since social economy and social enterprises contribute significantly to addressing challenges such as including the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in both society and the labour market. A balance should be struck between the legislative objective of giving visibility to this sector and supporting its development, and the danger of neglecting some other forms of social enterprises which are not recognised as such, but which nonetheless deliver services of general interest.

The approach towards the recognition of the social economy and social enterprises should be chosen following a careful assessment of the impact of various measures on the sector in the EU Member States. Relevant experience in EU Member States should be assessed and used to build trust in the sector and increase understanding of the evolving concepts of the social economy and social enterprises.

*The EU-Serbia JCC invited the **Serbian** government to establish at national level a working group for social entrepreneurship that would bring together all relevant stakeholders in a constructive dialogue. This working group would establish a broad framework for the development of social entrepreneurship, formulate a social entrepreneurship development strategy in Serbia, and monitor the quality and level of training of social entrepreneurs.*

At local level, the EU-Serbia JCC recommended that regional support centres for social entrepreneurship should be established to provide support for local authorities in recognising the role of social enterprises. Those centres should also help social enterprises with capacity-building measures and with establishing partnerships with the public and private sectors.

Public administration reform

The legislative framework in the Western Balkans is in place and legislation seems to be of good quality, but what is lacking is its effective implementation. In all the countries of the region many bodies seem to exist only on paper, and administration, at both national and local level, seems to lack the capacity to implement, monitor and evaluate existing legislation and action plans.

Western Balkans authorities should not restrict the good practice of conducting public consultations. Governments are asked to enable free access to information for citizens, without unnecessary restrictions in the form of "business" or "tax" confidentiality. In order to improve the availability of information to the public, the authorities could create catalogues of services provided by each individual public body to make citizens better informed and to further implement modernisation policies.

There is concern about the extensive use of urgent procedures in adopting legislation, including legislation related to the EU accession process, as such procedures do not allow for sufficient consultation of stakeholders and the wider public. Public consultations need to be effective and deadlines more realistic to enable all interested parties to provide qualitative input.

Regarding the law on civil servants and state employees, the EU-Montenegro JCC asked the Montenegrin government to adopt the necessary secondary legislation to ensure further depoliticisation of the state administration, especially with regard to the hiring of new staff. They stressed that the selection procedure following an open competition should always be conducted in accordance with objective criteria, as should staff appraisals.

The members of the JCC called on the Montenegrin government to establish a comprehensive register ("metaregister") of all public sector registries in the country, both on paper and in electronic format, in order to provide the basis for more efficient data exchange from official records.

Involvement of the social partners and other CSOs in the preparation of the Economic Reform Programme and the Employment and Social Policy Reform Programme

The importance of Economic Reform Programmes (ERPs) has been highlighted, as has that of meaningful involvement by social partners and other CSOs in the process of developing and implementing these programmes.

It is of the utmost importance to ensure the sustainability of structures and the monitoring mechanism of the ERP and the ESRP, at the level of both the government and civil society. The knowledge and experience obtained during the first phase of structured monitoring of the ERP and the ESRP by civil society should be kept up and developed.

Economic and Social Councils play an important role in shaping and monitoring the ERP and the ESRP, and the Western Balkans authorities are invited to regularly involve and consult them in the process of adopting these important documents and all the reforms stemming from them.

The EU-Serbia JCC welcomed the establishment of the Platform for Monitoring the Implementation of the Economic Reform Programme (ERP) and the Employment and Social Reform Programme (ESRP), incorporated in the National Convention on the EU (NCEU), as a new form of structured dialogue between the Serbian Government and CSOs. It reminded the Serbian authorities that the European Commission's Guidance for the Economic Reform Programmes notes that the involvement of the social partners and other civil society organisations in reporting on programme implementation is crucial to creating ownership and the widest possible political support.

4. A LOOK INTO THE NEEDS OF SPECIFIC GROUPS

Enabling civic space and the state of civic dialogue

There is deep concern about the shrinking space for civil society in a number of countries in the Western Balkans. It is noted that the EU and its Member States have committed themselves to promoting space for civil society and enhancing support for building the capacity of CSOs to strengthen their voice in the development process and to advance political, social and economic dialogue. The EU and its Member States are invited to adopt tougher and more coherent approaches and to take concrete actions to protect and expand civil society space and bring concrete benefits to the citizens of the Western Balkans countries.

Governments in the region are strongly encouraged to commit to a more specific and predictable timeline and allocation of resources for enabling an environment for civil society development, and to speed up the establishment of the National Council for Civil Society (NCSS). Selection criteria for NCSS members should be clearly stated in legal provisions, and CSOs should be supported in setting up their own transparent mechanism for appointing their representatives.

EU institutions should pay more attention to the real needs of the citizens within the Western Balkans regions and to the views and analysis of the civil society organisations, since they are generally closer to the citizens than the political elites.

The involvement of grassroots organisations, particularly outside the capital, remains a challenge to be addressed as a core financing priority for both national and EU financial assistance, i.e. encouraging the use of institutional support in national financial schemes for CSOs, developing a resource centre for reliable local NGOs focused on community-building, supporting participatory processes to address local community issues, promoting the values of CSOs and of volunteering.

The EU-Montenegro JCC has welcomed the establishment of the council for cooperation between government institutions and NGOs, where it will contribute to the functional and non-discriminatory inclusion of CSOs in consultation processes. On other hand, the JCC expressed concern about the negative environment in which certain CSOs (those critical of government policies in the area of the rule of law) operate and about smear campaigns directed against them and their leaders, as well as about the dismissal of their representatives from bodies such as RTCG council and the council of the Anti-corruption Agency.

The EU-Serbia JCC expressed concern about shrinking civic space, both in the EU and in Serbia. It condemned the attacks on CSOs by representatives of government, parliament and government-funded media. The JCC invited the Serbian authorities to guarantee the protection of human rights defenders, anti-corruption organisations and independent journalists and to prosecute and bring to justice perpetrators and those that have ordered attacks on CSOs. It invited the Serbian government to adopt a national strategy for an enabling environment for CSOs and its accompanying action plan.

After concluding in mid-2015 that the space for CSOs in North Macedonia is shrinking, access to state institutions is being denied, the environment is unfriendly, intimidation is widespread and public money goes only to the CSOs close to the government, the picture dramatically changed towards the end of 2017 when the EESC noted that under the new government the climate in the country had improved considerably, with positive signs in the area of human rights, media freedom and participation of CSOs in decision making.

The EESC concluded in September 2018 that civic space in Albania did not seem to be shrinking, although the environment of functioning and financing of the CSOs needed to be improved. CSOs outside Tirana should be strengthened, as should the participation of CSOs in political decision-making (a bottom-up approach should be promoted).

Youth policies (employment and participation in society)

The EESC has organised hearings on the issue of skills development and the role of vocational and educational training (VET) in fighting unemployment and emigration of the population, especially young people, from the countries of the Western Balkans.

Youth unemployment is a key indicator for the well-being of society in any country. It is noted that the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) figure in the Western Balkans is above the EU average and that public authorities need to establish a proper guidance and dual (education/work) training system as rapidly as possible, in order to increase the employability of young people and help match up supply and demand for skills in the labour market.

Considering the very high level of youth unemployment in the Western Balkans, it is recommended that the EU Youth Guarantee be extended to the region, with the aim of providing practical solutions for young people within four months of completing a course of study or a job, with new educational, training and job options. Dual education should be established in cooperation with the social partners, including chambers of commerce and industry and other business associations.

The strengthening of the cooperation between the education and private and public sectors is advised, with the aim of providing practical training, internships or employment for young people. In this context, it is important to support the recognition of non-formal competencies and education.

The importance of supporting self-employment is stressed, and also that of facilitating access to credit for young entrepreneurs, including ad hoc measures for young farmers.

Social enterprises have an important role to play in bringing female entrepreneurs together and should be encouraged across the region in order to coordinate action and facilitate successful access to funding. Equally importantly, youth entrepreneurship should be based on innovation and the entrepreneurial spirit of the new millennial generation.

The Western Balkans authorities should take a holistic approach to youth unemployment, supporting young people through education, career guidance, training and employment, and creating opportunities for them that will enable them to plan their future and enter adulthood.

The EU-Montenegro JCC stressed the importance of evaluating all existing programmes related to professional training for young people. In addition, it called upon the Montenegrin authorities to continue to provide young people with information on and strongly encourage them to take part in the new Erasmus+ programme.

The EU-Serbia Civil Society JCC stressed the need for the Serbian authorities to pay special attention to young people in order to provide them with quality education and quality professional guidance in order to successfully match them with their future profession. In order for young people to gain from national and international mobility during their education and work, it was stressed that it is also of great importance to make use of European skills recognition instruments.

*After organising a hearing with local CSOs on Youth Policy and Youth Participation, the EESC recommended that the **Albanian** authorities decisively fight the most pronounced problems young people in Albania are facing such as poverty, unemployment, emigration (70% of young people would like to leave the country, stating corruption, marginalisation and poverty as the main reasons), criminality among young people (more than half of criminal offences are committed by young people), low participation of young people in politics (young politicians are low-key figures and lack real decision-making power).*

Rights and empowerment of women in the Western Balkans

The EU and the Western Balkans are facing shared challenges regarding gender inequality: widespread domestic violence, limited labour market opportunities, harassment and violence in the workplace, salary and pension gaps between women and men, reproductive and maternity rights and unequal access to participation in high-level politics (despite existing targeted objectives).

Owing to the patriarchal culture which results in their marginalised role, women face prejudices and gender stereotypes, labour market and education segregation and much greater risk of discrimination and violence that impede their advancement to leadership positions. Female leadership in the Western Balkans needs to be supported and women's active participation in the society promoted. The development of initiatives that would allow gender balance in decision-making bodies and company boards are encouraged, as well as the increase of female entrepreneurship. It is stressed that these initiatives should also include minority communities, particularly Roma, the LGBTIQ community and women with disabilities.

Labour market trends in the region reveal high inactivity rates among women. Governments need to provide support to ensure higher employment levels for women are achieved during the enlargement process.

The role of the CSOs in the Western Balkans in holding governments to account for effective policy implementation is paramount, as well as in monitoring and preventing violence against women. CSOs working on the promotion and protection of women's rights should be recognised as important partners in conducting comprehensive and systematic reforms aimed at achieving gender equality in practice.

It is important to develop a roadmap and measures that could lead to more equal distribution of power and resources in the Western Balkans. There is a need for strong and persistent work with civic and social partners in order to be effective in fighting and advocating for women's rights. Future efforts in the Western Balkans should be aimed not only at bringing legislation related to women's rights in line with the EU acquis, but also and most importantly at closing the gap between existing laws and their proper implementation.

There is a need for all actors to further promote and enhance the role of women and girls as agents of change for the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies, including conflict prevention, mediation, peace-building and conflict recovery.

Violence against women is typically not recognised as such in the Western Balkans: there is often a lack of prosecution and proper sentencing of perpetrators as well as feeble support for victims. It is emphasised that the institutions that should offer protection often lack understanding or are unresponsive and free legal aid is not always available. It is also stressed that awareness needs to be raised in the region, prevention against violence needs to be enhanced and the Istanbul Convention – one of the goals of which is ensuring enough specialised support services, including shelters and helplines for survivors – needs to be implemented, particularly with regard to the financing of CSO-run safe houses.

Particular attention needs to be given to female entrepreneurship in view of its potential to significantly increase the region's growth prospects. Female entrepreneurs and their business organisations should be systematically included in all policy development processes that are relevant to the social and economic dimension of enlargement.

Gender equality should feature among the top priorities in the EU accession negotiations with the countries of the Western Balkans.

Minority rights

More efficient cooperation and joint action is needed between national human rights structures, social partners, civil society organisations and government authorities to advance a human rights agenda and to assist those who are particularly vulnerable.

Respecting the rights and culture of minorities is fundamental for the development of a democratic civil society in all Western Balkan countries. Therefore, the countries of the Western Balkans are encouraged to pay increased attention to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and minorities, in particular the Roma. It is stressed that clear results in this area, as well as further progress in inter-ethnic relations and protection of minorities and minority rights (in education, access to media, use of minority languages including in public administration, etc.), must be delivered.

There is an urgent need for the public authorities to take stronger action, in partnership with civil society organisations, in order to better protect the rights of minorities, especially as the implementation of the existing human rights' instruments remain limited, including those protecting the LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer) community and people with disabilities, as well as the implementation of Roma action plans.

The LGBTIQ community still suffers from widespread prejudice, discrimination, threats and physical attacks, and the governments of the region need to align their legislation with the EU acquis, implement it and fund public campaigns to fight against prejudice, and support them in their efforts to increase visibility.

With an estimated population of 6 million in the EU and 1 million in the Western Balkans, the rights of Roma are to be defended, freely exercised and progressively achieved in terms of education, healthcare, employment and housing.

It is important to ensure equal access to healthcare for vulnerable groups, especially people with disabilities and Roma. In that sense, all barriers to access to health services – physical constraints, logistical constraints or discriminatory practices – should be removed.

The EU-Serbia Civil Society JCC called for the revision of the legislation concerning the role of national councils of national minorities, in order to provide more efficient mechanisms for the protection of the independence of editorial policy in the media founded by national councils. It was recommended that the provision on media pluralism should be fostered in the media using the languages of the national minorities by developing mechanisms for financing media not founded by national councils, while at the same time promoting the values of intercultural and multilingual public information.

The EU-Serbia Civil Society JCC expressed satisfaction that the last editions of the Pride Parade in Belgrade had taken place without incidents and that they were attended by some of the highest ranking Serbian officials.

5. TOOLS FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

The role of civil society in promoting sustainable growth and employment

Political authorities need to focus more on addressing fundamental reforms early in the enlargement process, in close cooperation with the economic and social partners. Western Balkan countries and the EU have to ensure an effective use of EU programmes supporting competitiveness and promoting economic growth such as Horizon 2020 and COSME for SMEs.

Social dialogue is key for the economic and social development of the Western Balkans and the EU. It is stressed that, in the context of enlargement, candidate countries and potential candidate countries should be encouraged to consult and include social partners, in particular when reforming employment and social legislation.

Governments of the region are invited to invest in complementary approaches to classical economic policies (circular economy, social economy, sustainable development goals (SDGs), mainstreaming) in order to boost overall growth and employment.

Support for social partners and other civil society organisations should be provided on an equal footing and both groups need to be closely involved in their national strategies towards EU accession and negotiation structures, as well as in EU-funded programmes. More funds, including organisational grants, need to be allocated to the capacity building of social partners and CSOs so that they can effectively participate in these processes. Improvements in the quality and content of social dialogue in candidate and potential candidate countries should be encouraged.

The EESC has also encouraged social partners from the Western Balkans countries to deepen their relations at regional level.

The governments of the region should comply with and guarantee compliance with labour laws, and improve tripartite social dialogue. The effectiveness of dialogue has been weakened by poor economic performance and low growth, which has pushed the parties into defensive positions. It is also stressed that social cohesion requires employment-friendly economic policies and measures ensuring the sustainability of social protection networks.

The Connectivity Agenda

Infrastructure - transport and energy issues - must be a high priority in the negotiations with the Western Balkan countries. As part of the accession negotiations, candidate countries are encouraged to implement the EU acquis as soon as possible in order to promote their integration into the EU internal energy market, to the benefit of their citizens.

The Energy Community, which aims to expand the EU's energy acquis to enlargement and neighbourhood countries, should be further strengthened and closely integrated into the project of Energy Union. CSOs should be systematically involved and integrated in the meetings of the Energy Community.

Energy should be a factor for the development and interconnectivity of the region and the citizens of the Western Balkans. Such factors should give a clear idea of the economic and environmental benefits of accession to the EU.

Better interregional cooperation is required, along with the development of projects in the field of energy; this will enhance regional stability, business activity and job creation within the Western Balkans (green jobs, as well as traditional ones).

Developing an inclusive green economy will increase job creation opportunities. It is stressed that green jobs should not be understood just as jobs in a few new emerging sectors, but all jobs created in connection with the "greening" of production processes and products in all sectors.

A balance needs to be struck between conventional and renewable energies in the region: new interconnections need to be established between energy networks, or existing interconnections with the EU's networks strengthened. It is stressed that the investment in renewables is necessary, and must be based on reinforced connections and networks and supported by a clear and sound legal framework. Western Balkans countries have major renewable energy potential, which must be mobilised and benefit from investment so as to enable these countries to participate in the EU's 2030 Framework for Climate and Energy Policies.

The EESC supported the Transport Community Treaty signed by the EU and the Western Balkan candidates and potential candidates on 12 July 2017 and encouraged the parties to further develop

it. Donors are advised to concentrate their investments to connect the EU TEN-T Core network and the infrastructure of the Western Balkans.

The EU-Serbia JCC has called upon Serbian authorities to use the ongoing process of developing a new national climate change strategy as an opportunity to adapt, in a participatory manner, its economic programmes in areas such as energy, transport, industry and agriculture, so as to foster low carbon development. Serbian authorities were encouraged to properly and transparently include all relevant stakeholders, particularly CSOs and local communities, as equal partners in this process. Members of the JCC invited the Serbian authorities to fully implement the principles of sustainable development and safeguard protected natural areas from new energy or mining projects that may negatively impact the environment.

The EU-Montenegro JCC recommended that the Montenegrin authorities strengthen regional cooperation in the fields of transport and energy. It advised the government of Montenegro to make the most of opportunities for private funding/co-financing of priority projects as well as complementary projects (public-private partnerships) and to create suitable conditions for this type of projects, while paying particular attention not to create an environment that would enable the development of social dumping or otherwise affect the rights of employees.

Digitalisation as a tool for social and economic development

Western Balkans authorities should increase their efforts towards effective and systematic implementation of the legislation in the area of digitalisation. In particular, digitalisation needs to be integrated and monitored in the area of building and maintenance of critical infrastructure (such as energy and transport) and when providing services of general interest (such as e-government and e-health).

Access to the internet is a fundamental right of every citizen and, in order to provide quality universal services, governments in the region should aim to achieve full coverage of their territory with broadband, high-speed internet.

Citizens are the real engine of digital development and need to be able to fully use the potential of digitalisation as a tool for economic growth and social development. It is recommended that governments step up their efforts in the area of digital education and training. This ought to be done at all levels and in direct cooperation with social partners, with the ultimate aim of developing and modernising the necessary competences of workers. Particular attention needs to be given to specialised training for teachers and managers.

Social dialogue will be of crucial importance in the efforts to alleviate the effects of the digital revolution on the future organisation of labour and labour relations, with the aim of developing appropriate medium and long-term measures that will guarantee decent remuneration, quality of employment, work-life balance and universal access to social security.

The creation of a digital society and the development of digital skills in all Western Balkan countries should benefit both the public and private sectors.

EU-Montenegro JCC expressed concern at the fact that only a limited number of enterprises in Montenegro used the internet and digital tools in order to increase their productivity and development. They recommended that the Montenegrin government support the development of enterprises that use such practices, especially of start-ups, whose "core business" is digital innovation.

EU-Montenegro JCC recommended that the Montenegrin government and the EU institutions find a way to align Montenegro, as soon as possible, with those initiatives beneficial to the citizens such as the abolition of roaming tariffs. It also asked the public authorities in Montenegro to pay special attention to digital identity, security of online transactions, the internet as a safe place for minors, the right to privacy and the right to be forgotten.

The EU-Montenegro JCC has recommended extending the Wifi4EU initiative to Montenegro, in order to enable free high-speed internet to remote locations in the country. To this end, the JCC has urged the EU institutions to secure funds for the building and modernisation of digital infrastructure in Montenegro, not only through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), but also by exploring the options for including Montenegro in other EU programmes and initiatives in the area of digitalisation.

The JCC welcomed the fact that the Montenegrin government volunteered to chair the working group on cyber security, since they believe this is an area of great importance for the process of digitalisation and one where considerable effort needs to be made in order to keep this process safe.

The Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III)

The EESC welcomes the European Commission's proposal to increase the funds allocated to the new Programme for Pre-accession Assistance for 2021-2027 (IPA III) and invites all EU institutions to support this increase. The increase in pre-accession assistance should enable the Western Balkans to be better prepared for accession, meet the acquis standards and improve economic and social convergence with the EU.

It is necessary to ensure that the new financial pre-accession instrument under the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) is prepared on time and harmonised with the requirements of the Structural Funds – especially in terms of programming, financial management and control. The EESC has pointed out that EU funds should take account of the need to tackle social and economic inequalities.

The Commission is encouraged to further facilitate the access of social partners and other civil society organisations to the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA). Priority for pre-accession assistance should be given to institutions and initiatives creating links between the candidates and potential candidates in the fields of energy, communication, digitalisation, innovation, transportation and protection of the environment.

IPA III should increase funding for CSOs, including in the form of operating grants and multiannual financing which can reach the smallest organisations and the most disadvantaged sectors of society. The Commission is encouraged to monitor the implementation of the code of conduct on partnership with civil society within the Structural Funds and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance.

The Western Balkan partners need to mainstream the gender perspective into all relevant programmes funded through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance. Thematic funds for combating domestic violence and support for women's civic and media activism should be developed.

It is of the utmost importance to ensure that partners from the region develop, strengthen and maintain the capacities to manage the increased funds. The authorities are invited to ensure a continuous project pipeline and develop and implement efficient recruitment and retention policies

for staff dealing with the planning, implementation and monitoring of the reforms and investments needed for EU integration, allowing for good absorption and optimal use of EU funds.

In the area of management of EU funds, the authorities are invited to use the existing relevant civil society platforms more efficiently and transparently, especially when it comes to monitoring the implementation of the IPA funds.

REFERENCE DOCUMENTS AND WEBPAGES

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[Energy – a factor for development and a deeper accession process in the Western Balkans](#) adopted on 8 October 2015, OJ C 32, 28.1.2016, p. 8–11

[EU Enlargement Strategy](#) adopted on 18 February 2016, OJ C 133, 14.4.2016, p. 31-37

[Economic and social cohesion and European integration of the Western Balkans – challenges and priorities](#) adopted on 19 April 2018, OJ C 262, 25.7.2018, p. 15-22

[Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance \(IPA III\)](#) adopted on 12 December 2018

[Women in the Western Balkans](#) adopted on 23 January 2019

JCCs:

[EU-Montenegro Civil Society Joint Consultative Committee \(JCC\)](#)

[EU-Serbia Civil Society Joint Consultative Committee \(JCC\)](#)



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